SHARE AND SHARE ALIKE

REGINALD WRIGHT KAUFFMAN

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SHARE AND SHARE ALIKE

Share and Share Alike

An Adventure Story

BY

Reginald Wright Kauffman

CHELSEA HOUSE

79 Seventh Avenue New York City

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Share and Share Alike

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To WILL H. HAYS

DEAR WILL:

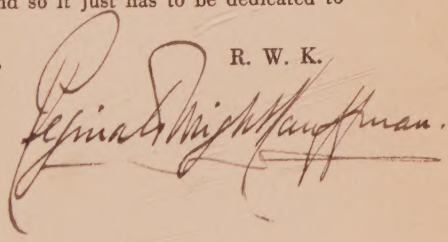
Every time I think of breathless Sam Jefford and this breakneck *Share and Share Alike*, I think of you. Samuel rushes, it is granted, across the wild scenery, wilder men and wildest adventures of Martinique; and you might argue—indeed, you do—the topography, people, and plot of New York and Hollywood are somewhat less exciting. The *zombis* don't fling fatalities at you—you climb no ladders to peep at mysterious villains or trace corpses to cellars in subtropic haciendas—perhaps you have never fought a knife fight to the finish. But you possess all my hero's tendency toward getting things done in a hurry; that I found out as soon as the elder Colonel Roosevelt introduced us, and you maintained the impression through our year's association.

Don't you remember that twenty-four hours when you healed a terrible political wound in Indiana—sat up all night dictating on the train a hundred letters; made a will for a San Francisco millionaire at the Waldorf; conferred with ten deputations; gave interviews to three senators, a dozen cranks, and twenty-four reporters; did your regular day's work and delivered one speech at luncheon and another at a formal dinner? Well, in his own hectic *milieu*, my Sam is like that. This is a story of him. And so it just has to be dedicated to W. H. H.

Always your sincerely,

R. W. K.

Champel, Genève, Suisse,
Oct. 31 (O. S.), 1924.



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CHAPTER I

SALARY IN ADVANCE

IT was hot. It was so hot that to speak about the heat was to court insult—and not to speak about it was to be sneered at as having assumed the pose of a pseudophilosopher pretending disbelief in the thermometer's reality. It was hot in the nerve-filing way peculiar to those parts of our republic which were originally miscalled temperate, and the inhabitants of which now fatally refuse to regulate their summer existence in safe and suitable recognition of the torrid truth.

It was Middle-Atlantic-States hot.

Into and out of the "local" room of the New York *Courier* gasping copy boys dragged their heavy feet. Decrepit typewriters clicked torpidly. Too turgid to rise higher, halfway between floor and ceiling, the smoke of many damp cigarettes hung blue.

Jefford sat before the machine he would not eventually buy, and, like everybody else of sense in the

metropolis, devoutly wished that he was somewhere else. On this twenty-first floor of a skyscraper there seemed to be no more stir of air than had been observable in the high-walled streets below; in other words, there seemed to be none at all. To secure a mere illusion of breeze, Sam had edged his desk beside a window that overlooked the East River, and the view disturbed his soul's peace profoundly.

"Hell!" said he.

It was not an imprecation. On the contrary, it was a carefully chosen word accurately descriptive of his moral condition.

The clutter of dusty roofs cleft by narrow thoroughfares, the circular bulk of gas reservoirs, the prisonlike drabness of that bit of Manhattan immediately below him—these were outward and visible signs of his inward and spiritual incarceration. The bold leap of the two bridges, and the sky line of Brooklyn churches beyond, he scarcely heeded. Nothing could rightly be said to leave anybody cold on such a panting August afternoon, but it was neither of these architectural achievements that raised his temperature above even that of his fellows, nor was it, for that matter, the sordid rubble

out of which they rose. It was what floated on the water.

"Hell!" said Sam for the second time with deeper feeling. Now he was in the worst place of torment.

The river was full of shipping. Tugs chugged through whitening ripples as if the heat were indeed a trifle. The cries of sirens rose like challenges to adventure, storming the blue heights of heaven. Vessels with strange flags were slipping in from far-away ports; boats that flew those Stars and Stripes for which Sam Jefford had fought were steaming out to the most distant of earth's four corners—and Samuel wanted to go.

He rolled a discontented cigarette that his fingers moistened.

"I'd rather be anywhere than here," he told himself. "I'd rather be in the tropics, where the weather has a *right* to be hot!"

Tall and husky and twenty-nine he was, with dark hair and excellent hazel eyes. Nobody would have called him handsome—he was far too roughhewn to provoke that dubious epithet—but few would have omitted a second glance at him, and not many a third.

It was his combination of obviously good physique with equally obvious soundness of character that invited the gaze. One saw immediately that here was muscular fitness based as much on decent living as on a sturdy frame; one assumed—and rightly—that here was honesty owing nothing to inexperience and a great deal to courage. In the days when he used to smile, the quiet early days in his Wisconsin home and those succeeding days of a lieutenancy through five-week intervals on the firing line in the Argonne, Jefford employed a grin that speedily compelled confidence never unrewarded.

But he wasn't smiling now.

"Mackenzie Bay for choice," he said, first tearing free a sheet of copy paper that had stuck to his bared forearm and then fingering the weak wreck of his soft collar; "but Guadaloupe or Martinique if necessary. Anyhow, anywhere but here!"

The A. E. F. had provided him his sole adventure into foreign parts. Nothing appeared less likely than that it would have a successor. Nothing—and yet his chance was, little as he guessed it, at that moment making its pretty way uptown.

Something not at all pretty ripped across the soggy atmosphere of the *Courier's* "local" room:

"Jefford!"

This was Branson's voice—the voice of the city editor. He happened to be one of those who like to think themselves iron men. Reporters innocent of war knowledge said he sounded like a seventy-five; Sam didn't say what *he* thought. What he said now was only:

"Yes, sir."

"Come here!"

"Coming, sir."

Perhaps only instinctively and habitually—certainly in an unexpected and quite unconscious defiance of the heat—Jefford managed something of his old military snap as he walked to that high desk in the center of the big room and stopped, all but saluting, before the shirt-sleeved man who sat there. The shirt-sleeved man was ominously entrenched behind paste pots, shears, muggy galley proofs and a general disorder of clipped newspapers that could be equaled only upon the desk of another city editor and surpassed nowhere in the world.

"How long have you been back?"

Branson had red hair and a crisp, red mustache and sharp—entirely too sharp—blue eyes. He had also—always—a lump of chewing gum in his mouth and, all about him, a deserved reputation for severity.

"I've been back about twenty minutes," said Sam quietly.

"I didn't see you."

It seemed that this was a crime—on the part of the person who hadn't been seen. Still quietly, Jefford said:

"Yes, sir."

Quietly, but quite calmly. He was new to the *Courier*. Had he not been, he would have known that Mr. Branson had no fondness for employees who did not fear him and that there were no others that didn't. However, that knowledge would scarcely have altered Sam's voice or appreciably affected his fate.

"You've changed your desk," charged the city editor.

"No, sir."

"You have!"

"Only moved my old desk, sir."

"It's the same thing. Moved your desk, then. Why did you move your desk?"

"I had a theory that I might be cooler beside the window than in the middle of the room."

Branson's face defied the color of his hair to match it. Could it be possible that, by making a simple reply, this ingenuous-seeming young man was attempting to ridicule the simplicity of his master's question? Such a thing had never once happened in all the iron executive's term of office. His blue eyes glared into Jefford's hazel eyes. Branson's could pierce most screens, but the frank, blank stare they now encountered was impervious. A fresh line of attack was necessitated—it was the one originally intended, anyhow. What in the world had made him forget it?

"Twenty minutes—you've been here twenty minutes? Why didn't you report when you came in? Every man is expected to report to the city desk as soon as he returns from an assignment."

Sam's brief career in New York journalism had not taught him that, but his dereliction was really due to the cordial dislike he entertained for the very essence of his assignment. However, he knew that

ignorance was no excuse, and had at least learned that on the *Courier* disapproval of an ordered task amounted to lese majesty. Having been a soldier, he now kept silence and decided to wait upon the direct question. Of course, it was bound to come.

"I won't have such slackness!" Branson pursued, because he had to keep on talking. He had originally planned his sort of manner because, except for it, he knew no way to handle men; then years of practice and dyspepsia cultivated the poisonous vine until what was once a precaution became a habit and grew into a predominating characteristic. During the dog days, his bad temper was almost luxuriant. "Now, then: did you get that interview with Mrs. Sutphen-Brown?"

The direct question; it had come!

"Yes, sir," Sam nodded. He stuck to the "sir" for the sake of the army.

"Eh?"

Branson was staggered. He had never expected Jefford's success; that was precisely why, not liking the man, he had given Sam the assignment. Everybody else had failed—the best reporters on the

Courier—and how was it to be guessed that a raw fellow from somewhere in the West would win? As a peevish soul, the city editor wished that the reply had been negative.

"Yes, sir. I got it."

Well, Branson was a journalist, after all, and a yellow journalist, at that. His profession got the better of his personal prejudice. He perceptibly brightened.

"What? You did?" Then there came a twinge of dyspepsia. "But you mean the crowd did!"

"There weren't any other newspaper men there."

This was too good to be true! "Didn't anybody else get it?"

"No, sir—at least, I don't think so."

Sutphen-Brown's fourth divorce! And exclusive —an interview with the fashionable and vowed-to-silence plaintiff! Branson came as near to enthusiasm as the Bransons can come:

"It's worth a first-page display. Write a hundred and fifty. Tell me——"

Sam began to roll a fresh cigarette. "I can't."

"You——" When this queer young person spoke,

there was no believing one's ears. The city editor took a long breath. "What was that?"

"I can't write it," Sam explained.

Plain puzzling, that. Reporters weren't commonly modest in regard to their talents. There was no copy reader that didn't think he could write an editorial.

"What do you mean—you can't? If you think it's too big for you to handle, give the facts to some rewrite man—give 'em to Thompson."

The cigarette was rolling nicely now. Sam looked up from it to the searching eyes of his employer.

"I mean that Mrs. Sutphen-Brown's lawyer was late getting back from his lunch. That Mrs. Sutphen-Brown was waiting for him when I came into the outer office, and mistook me for his new partner. Before I could interrupt her and tell her who I was——"

"Tell her who you were?" Branson gasped. "You weren't damned fool enough to do that, were you? When you'd such luck?"

"Before I could interrupt," continued Jefford, "she'd poured out the whole story of the high spots."

Perhaps not such a fool, after all! The city edi-

tor's eyes gleamed with journalistic greed satisfied. "Great! What *was* the story?"

"That's the point, sir. Of course, as soon as I did say who I was, she begged me to promise not to use the stuff."

Branson's mouth opened too wide; his chewing-gum fell into a paste pot.

"And you—you promised?"

"Yes."

"And you propose to keep your word?"

"She's a woman," said Sam. He looked down at the just-completed cigarette—and threw it away.

He looked up then, and the eyes of the pair met. Jefford's steady hazel gaze and the now flaming blue of the city editor's. The latter, to do him credit, made an almost heroic effort at self-control.

"Not use the stuff—you won't even give it to Thompson to use?"

"She's a woman. And she's in trouble. And I've passed her my word."

Once more Branson tried to stare his reporter down, but it was no use. Therefore, the red-headed man pounced upon a piece of copy paper and scrib-

bled a few words with the stump of a lamp-black pencil.

"There you are, then." He held out the note. Let there be given him no good mark now because he did not explode; he found the situation beyond his explosive powers. "There's an order on the business office for your pay to date and one week's salary in advance. You can write that story and stay—or take this note and go!"

"Thank you," said Sam. "I'll take the note."

And he did.

CHAPTER II

QUEER COMMUNICATIONS

JUST about two weeks before ex-Lieutenant Samuel Jefford was dismissed—or resigned—from the local staff of the New York *Courier,* a letter, shamefully delayed in transit, was at last delivered at its destination. That letter was dated from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, which city of historic interest had never been blessed with Sam's presence for however brief a time; the envelope was addressed, moreover, to the Island of Corfu, off the Albanian coast in the Ionian Sea, and Jefford had made no nearer approach to that interesting body of water than the puddles of the Toul Sector in France. Finally, the writer of the epistle in question signed himself, after considerable use of the Quakers' "plain language," Benjamin Franklin Maynard, a name familiar to our friend only through common repute, and the feminine recipient was a person entirely outside the reporter's ken. At that time, in fact, he knew nothing whatever about the transaction; it all had to do with something of

which he was ignorant, but was also all something fated considerably and perilously to shape his immediate future. In such devious wise is the tapestry of life woven.

"Going to Martinique," repeated, as she read its opening lines, the person to whom the letter had been handed. "Why Martinique, I wonder?"

She was a healthy looking girl of the fairer sort, with chestnut hair of which the pleasant waves shone golden where they escaped from under her frilled white cap. Her face was eager and resolute, but not too resolute to be winning, though she wore a long white apron and an air of competency, and though her fingers were stained.

"Martinique, of all places in the world! Why, that's an island, too—but somewhere in the Lesser Antilles, isn't it?"

There was nobody about to answer her, but she put her reflection in question form because, like most of our American young girls—for she was American, by the way—her knowledge of the geography of the Western Hemisphere stopped, northward, at the Canadian border and went no farther south than the twenty-fifth parallel of latitude.

However, the query having been put, and the yellow air voicing no reply, she, being a sensible soul and practical, decided to read the rest of the letter, wisely deducing that some solution of her difficulties might be discoverable therein.

And some there was. Just exactly "some"—no more. She read on:

—the settlement of the matter thus requiring my personal presence there.

I shall want thee to meet me immediately upon my return to the United States, when, without delay, I propose to make over to thee my share. Although withdrawn from active affairs since thy departure, I have not canceled the old arrangement whereby I keep the same rooms at the Palmerston in New York City, and thither I shall at once repair after landing and expect thee to be awaiting me.

If there occurs any change in my plans in the interim, or if I have any new instructions to give, thee will find them awaiting thee at that hotel, in the care of its mail clerk. Take ship, therefore, as soon as possible after thee has received this message.

All along those mountains which were the ancient Istone, the light lay like liquid gold, from Cape St. Stephano to Cape St. Angelo. The peak of San Salvador and that of the Ten Creek Saints rose sharp under a clear sky; the valley was bright with every one of the seven plants that Homer found there so many centuries ago: fig and vine, pear, pomegranate and apple, oil-olive and wild-olive. Corfu has always been a spot that the average human being, having reached it, is loath to leave, and our particular human being had reasons besides its natural beauties to bind her there for yet a time, but she left it at the first opportunity after reading that letter. Apparently, Mr. Benjamin Franklin Maynard, of Philadelphia, was a man whose authority distance did not diminish.

This one of its subjects even avoided, at some trouble, the longer and slower southern route across the Atlantic. She took boat to Venice and train to Milan, where she caught an express by the Simplon, and so passed through Paris without stopping and got what should have been a speedy liner from Cherbourg.

Through Paris without stopping! Was she not indeed a woman of resolution?

Alas, something besides resolution is needed to propel a vessel over the ocean! The lady's ship was charming, the weather was delightful—but something went wrong first with the usual engines and then with their emergency substitutes. For the first occasion in her brief, but remarkable, history, that liner was late. She was three days overdue before she passed the Sandy Hook lightship and limped through the Lower Bay into New York Harbor.

All of the passengers were angry; the passenger from Corfu was no exception. She stormed into a taxicab and had herself conveyed directly to the Palmerston. To the room clerk she showed that Philadelphia letter.

He was impressed, and it takes more than the common run of names to impress a Manhattan hotel's room clerk. He even showed he was impressed, which is going to tremendous lengths.

"You are Miss Maynard?" he asked.

"Naturally," said the girl. Mystery, little as she surmised it, there was soon to be around her, but there was none inherent in her. She was Miss

Maynard, and she had had all the delays endurable —so she then thought—by her determined temperament. "Kindly let me have the keys."

She got them without further parley. Her voice was the sort that generally gets what its owner wants, especially when she was tired or in a hurry. She got the keys and three bell boys in the smallest notable fraction of a second. In less than a second more, she was soaring skyward upon an elevator the rapidity of which not even her impetuosity could censure.

The bell boys opened the door of a drawing-room whereof the furniture wore its summer covering. They drew back curtains and raised windows.

"That will do," said Miss Maynard, checking a charge upon the other rooms of the suite. "I shall attend to the rest myself. I'm tired now; I want to lie down."

Her tips were generous; they secured her instant privacy. What they could not secure her was the contemplated rest. The boys were no sooner gone than the girl perceived tokens plainly indicative of somebody's presence between Mr. B. F. Maynard's departure and her own arrival.

The Philadelphia Quaker, who liked whatever he was used to and hated all change, had of course experienced a good deal of trouble in finding, twenty years before, a New York hostelry that was at all likely to remain standing for the time that he was likely to need it; but quiet inquiries led him to the Palmerston, and his canny judgment proved correct. In those days, business took the old gentleman to this city once a fortnight; he desired to sleep at each visit in the same bed that he slept in at the visit previous, and he could afford to pay for the privilege. He bought it at this relatively quiet hotel, which the rest of the city considered aged at the date of his first signature on the register, and which was now smilingly regarded as quite prehistoric. The place hung on somehow, and he kept his share of its floor space long after the termination of his regular use therefor.

Presumably, he had stopped overnight here before sailing for Martinique. Certainly, leaving the question of service altogether aside, whenever he left the rooms, he left them in order, for he never left anything in any other condition. Yet now one glance

beyond the sphere of the bell boys' activities showed confusion, and confusion recently effected.

In the cubicle that Mr. Maynard had once made his fortnightly office, the desk, empty for many a month, had been given a thorough overhauling, its drawers tossed on the rug and one or two of them smashed as if the burglar was looking for secret compartments. Pictures were wrenched from the walls, the backs pulled off them. The rest of the suite was in little better plight; but—and this was stranger still—there were several easily portable articles of value that had been passed by untouched.

A burglar, yes. But what sort of burglar? And what was he seeking?

The girl went into the main hall, locking the door to the suite carefully behind her. The lock betrayed nothing, but she had heard of such things as master keys. She rang for an elevator and descended to the lobby.

The room clerk looked up at her approach. Most people looked up when Miss Maynard appeared.

"I hope you will be quite comfortable, Miss Maynard," he said. "Our maids are sometimes a little careless, and if you found the rooms somewhat

dusty—we're short-handed just now—but in a few minutes, we can——"

"I found——" began the girl.

The room clerk's fellow employee, the man who had charge of all letters and telegrams delivered at the Palmerston, had not been at his post when she arrived, but he was there now. At mention of her name, he had begun feverishly to run through a stack of missives.

"Miss Maynard," he said, "here is a cablegram for you."

CHAPTER III

HER BEAD BAG

THE merely irascible people seldom play any large part in life, even if they consider themselves "iron men"—as they usually do—for irascibility is one of the worst forms of moral weakness, and God has a way of shunting moral weakness into the hopper. Blue-eyed Branson stepped out of Sam Jefford's history when Sam stepped out of the *Courier's* office on that heavy August afternoon. Perhaps, too, the first lady in the case—the subject of Jefford's assignment, not a certain other lady as yet unknown to him—was also a moral weakling; at all events, she went on getting her husband's fourth divorce and forgot, as soon as he had left her presence, the stray reporter whose existence had momentarily disturbed her projected reticence. Sam also had his own affairs to consider—and he considered them.

He did casually wonder, when he left Branson gaping after him, whether the city editor was his

present self by later disease or original sin, but such metaphysical speculations did not long detain him. It did occur to him to ask himself if the fair litigant could ever guess the price of the promise she had hysterically exacted, yet that line of thought he also abandoned; he was sure that he would never set eyes on her again, and his assurance was well founded. So then he cashed his salary order at the *Courier's* business office, where they unemotionally treated dismissals as dull details of a dull routine, and, having walked a few aimless blocks and fought his way through the central door of a subway train, began to inquire what in the world he could find next to do to earn a living.

"I think," he decided as he choked in the head-splitting atmosphere of that rush-hour car, "I'll look up a boat that's bound anywhere north and ship aboard her as a deck hand."

Elbows dug into his back. The fists of strap hangers scraped his cheeks. Fat men's newspapers, folded to just the thinness that permitted their presence in this jam, rasped against his belt buckle before and the hem of his crash coat behind. There was a girl, the powder on whose face was streaked

by streams of moisture; she smiled at Sam—she had many gold teeth.

"And I think I'll get off at Grand Central," he concluded, "and take a bus."

He was vaguely headed for his far-uptown boarding house, where was nothing but a bad supper to attract him, and, once he had reached Fifth Avenue, it began to look as if he would have to walk all the way. At Forty-second Street filled bus after filled bus rushed implacably past the frantic gestures of fifty would-be passengers.

Sam didn't worry. It would be absurd to worry over a bit of a tramp when only money enough for three weeks' living stood between him and being a tramp. Why waste regret? Better exercise his mind on the problem of bread and butter. Idly he strolled as far as Forty-fourth Street and there paused from sheer inattention, in a knot of other disappointed bus seekers, before the sad remains of what, until recently, was Delmonico's.

The street lay parched in the breathless heat. This was that period of a New York summer day when the final ounce of oxygen seems to have been exhausted in the final effort of the city's millions

to struggle through throes of the long eight hours' work. Vehicles progressed by black magic; human beings were automata.

"Phew!" gasped Sam.

Almost always one of the most alive of the world's great thoroughfares, New York's preëminent "Avenue" has times when there is nothing quite so dead outside the pyramids. It is a street of adventure, but needs its rest and seizes recuperation in such pauses. They begin by being simply uncanny; they end by conveying the sense of brewing fresh miracles. Such an instant of suspended animation arrived now, and in it Sam's glance caught that of a girl in the waiting group standing impatiently about him.

She was so different from the little lady of that subway! This girl's cheeks were rosy with health; her eyes were blue, but as dissimilar from the blue of Branson's as is that of a harebell from that of a knife. Her mouth was a little determined, to be sure, but the waves of her chestnut hair were all softness. There was an eagerness in her face that masked her as an alien to her present surroundings. Indeed, to Jefford's quick, but somewhat old-fash-

ioned mind, there was only one note out of accord with the rest of her—the competent fingers holding a quite manifestly new bead bag were darkly stained.

"Cigarettes!" thought Sam.

He didn't, he told himself, mind girls smoking, but somehow smoking did not seem to belong to this particular type.

"And," he thought, "she doesn't even use a holder!"

Perhaps his face betrayed him. In any case, the girl looked quickly away, coloring slightly, and then Jefford saw the quite entirely unfitting man who stood so close to her as to appear a companion.

If the girl was no New Yorker, this was not an American. He was a small fellow, dressed in some foreign fashion—was it French?—which culminated in a bright yellow bow-tie with polka dots of red. It was exactly the sort of thing that could not be purchased in any State of our Union and that an anxious foreigner would bring along with him in the mistaken belief of its suitability to the land of his visitation.

Jefford didn't like it. He began to roll one of his

own cigarettes, of which he rolled so many and smoked so few.

That foreigner had a shambling, hangdog figure that, once seen, would be anywhere recognizable. He possessed, moreover, a face the gray of any unhealthy age, the face of a rat. He grew colorless, scant hair and small, sharp, prominent teeth that kept his pale lips parted, and there was a villainous cast in his right eye.

Jefford dropped his cigarette and ground his heel

There was a rattle of beads on the pavement.

on it. How could a girl like this——

"My bag—my bead bag!"

The girl was crying out. With astounding agility, the cross-eyed man was ducking through the crowd. He was ducking like a runner on a football field. He was running away.

Jefford shoved an agitated stout lady rudely aside. He bumped into a portly gentleman and sent him sprawling.

The foreigner had plunged directly into the rushing automobiles of Fifth Avenue. Jefford plunged after him.

That pickpocket was wonderful. He darted before

a purring limousine—ran south and around a snorting bus—pointed west directly in front of a taxicab —reached the center of the street and then, without pause—without any observable shadow of hesitation—began to repeat his tactics to evade the traffic headed in another direction.

Somehow Jefford managed pursuit. The limousine came to a dead stop just in time to save him; the bus had passed; the taxi grazed him, and its driver swore; but Jefford got across the street.

If there were cries from the rear, they failed to carry. Many looked at the first runner, but none troubled to impede him, and all grinned inanely at his follower. The quick ratlike man had an immense advantage as he raced along Forty-fourth Street—the advantage of the lighter participant in a race. Jefford began to lose ground. He was about to waste necessary breath in a cry of "Stop thief!" when his quarry slipped on a banana peel in front of the Harvard Club, and Jefford landed solidly and squarely upon him.

What followed was over in an instant. He wrenched the bag from his captive's hand—and then the captive was a captive no longer. An oblig-

ing member of the Harvard Club was issuing thence for home and, ultimately, dinner. This personage—otherwise no more important than City Editor Branson or Mrs. Sutphen-Brown—had been somewhere refreshing himself after a difficult day. He was in no mood to draw nice distinctions. He saw what he conceived to be an assault and seized the assailant by the collar. By the time that Sam had shouted an explanation more vehement than convincing, the cross-eyed man had scrambled to his feet, vanished into and probably made a clean get-away through an office building. Jefford very much wanted to revenge his mortification upon its zealous cause. However, the girl was waiting; there was nothing for it but to limp back to the Delmonico with only the torn bag and the puffing policeman who had appeared as Sam concluded his explanation to the club member.

"I'm sorry——" began Jefford, coming up with the policeman.

"Are you hurt?" asked the girl.

"Look here, miss, I want to know," said the policeman.

The girl had given one glance inside the bag.

"Are you hurt?" she repeated to Sam. Her eyes were like flowers!

Sam shook his head.

"Did this guy take your purse?" the policeman demanded. His hand was heavy on Jefford's shoulder.

"Nonsense!" said the girl.

"How do you know? There were two of 'em run, an' one of 'em did it. Mebbe both."

The crowd, of course, had thickened. A couple of its original components emitted murmurs that sounded like agreement with the suspicions of an officer anxious to believe himself successful.

"If you don't think I can tell you correctly, why do you ask me?" inquired the bag's owner. Then she became amazing: "I know that this gentleman did not take my bag, because I have known him all my life."

The policeman's hand was loosened. The crowd fell back. Sam's jaw fell, too. He stared at the girl; she regarded him unwinkingly.

"What? I—I beg p-pardon—b-but——" stammered Sam.

Among them, had Branson and his Mrs. Sutphen-

Brown and that rat-faced snatch-purse driven him crazy? Was the heat at last too much for the former lieutenant? Or had a pretty girl—who smoked too many cigarettes—turned his head? He had never once seen her before; that he could have sworn to. As if he, or anybody, could see her and forget! Either he was mad and had not rightly heard her, or else she——

"I mean," he struggled on, "aren't you mistak——"

The policeman evinced signs of recovering malignancy.

The girl smiled serenely. "Mistaken to stand here? I don't like this sort of thing any better than you do, but how are we to get away? The busses are all full—*Archie!*"

"I don't mean that!" cried Sam. "I mean——"

He was mercifully cut short.

"Taxi? Taxi?"

A roving, ramshackle taxicab was rattling down upon them from Forty-third Street. Pleasant as this girl might be to look at, she was impossible to talk with. Flight was Jefford's sole present desire; for

the bewildered ex-reporter that alleged automobile was an engine of rescue.

"Yes!" yelled Sam. "You bet I want a taxi!" The driver, leaning expertly backward from his perch, had turned a knob and flung wide a shabby door. Jefford dived inside. "Uptown!" he called; he couldn't remember his own address.

He had lost sight of his mysterious friend. He saw the policeman shrug wide shoulders and turn away. The crowd was already resuming its personal interest in the passing busses.

The taxi coughed, nearly collided with two other taxis, hesitated. Its door was still swinging open, as the too-astounded passenger had left it. Now it suddenly closed with a resolute bang. It closed—as the girl of the bead bag, having imperturbably climbed inside, sat down beside him.

He ought to have been pleased—he was temporarily only the more amazed.

"Where," he asked, "where on earth are you going?"

"I'm going with you," she said.

CHAPTER IV

THE TAXICAB ADVENTURE

THAT miserable vehicle made clanking headway. The readily forgetful crowd and the half doubting policeman were satisfactorily disposed of, but Sam perceived that the very pretty girl's calm gaze studied him with approving appraisal, so that his hazel eyes, which could front unmoved an irate city editor, stared back at this uninvited guest in the frankest bewilderment.

There was a full minute of silence. Then, shifting her emphasis slightly, but significantly, she repeated her previous declaration.

"I'm going with *you*," said the very pretty girl.

Nothing less gallant should have met so gallant a statement; in his rare moments of embarrassment, however, politeness was not Jefford's strong point.

"It does look that way," he admitted. You couldn't escape the grudging quality of his tone.

"Do you really mind?" she seriously inquired.

He minded very much indeed. Tardily, it again came home to him that he ought to be giving his brain to considerations of his economic future, which was in all conscience precarious enough to deserve undivided attention.

He had allowed a chivalrous impulse temporarily to divert him—well, postpone him, then—but now, duty done, he was no longer in the mood for romantic adventuring. Perhaps he guessed—any young man in his situation would be pardoned for guessing—that, as a result of his recent encounter, he was by no means a beautiful figure; it is hard to feel heroic in soiled clothes. Sam became suddenly and acutely aware that one of his trouser legs had been torn in his street brawl and that the scratched kneecap, showing through the rent, was a ridiculous decoration. Did he mind? Decidedly he minded!

And yet, she *was* pretty!

His hesitant gaze took in her undeniable refinement. It was a refinement that merely increased her air of general efficiency, but it was genuine.

His will remained strong, but his voice proved a traitor. The best rebuke that he could offer her

sounded scarcely half as sarcastic as he wanted to make it.

"Oh, delighted, I'm sure!"

She took that at its face value and settled herself comfortably. "So——"

He groaned audibly. "Only have you any idea where it is I'm headed for? Because I haven't!"

"Wait a minute," said the lady. "You see, Mr.—— What did you tell me your name was?"

Sam thought that he might as well have let that policeman arrest him; he was evidently to be called upon to give his pedigree anyhow. He resigned himself to the inevitable consequences of her superior force.

"I didn't tell you; but you might as well know now as later. My name's Jefford."

"Then you see," she continued, as their division of the Avenue's afternoon procession halted to permit the passage of fluttering automobiles and desperate pedestrians from a cross street, "you see, Mr. Jefford, I have to have a talk with you."

Seeing nothing of the sort, he mouthed a noncommittal murmur.

"I was just wondering if you honestly thought it necessary. Of course, if you do——"

"What?" asked the girl.

"Why," she explained, "you've just saved me my steamship tickets!"

Sam always hated displays of gratitude; they made him horribly uncomfortable. Besides, in the present case, he did not consider himself as having shone as a star of the first magnitude.

"I fell down on the job," said he. He looked at his bleeding kneecap, then hurriedly crossed the other leg over it. "And on the pavement," he added. "The thief got away."

"I'm sorry you were hurt. You weren't badly, were you?"

Sympathy? That was worse yet! Jefford rarely swore; in this atmosphere, he couldn't. So all that he replied was "Oh," but he put the unadulterated spirit of profanity into his tone, and at once regretted it.

"So you weren't," the girl got his meaning. "I'm glad for that. As for the thief, never mind. It was better that you didn't catch him, so long as you got the bag."

"Better? How so?"

"I shouldn't have appeared against him in the police court, anyhow."

"What?" Sam was gripped, in spite of himself, by the unworthy fancy that perhaps the cross-eyed fellow had really been in her company.

"No," she said; "I shouldn't have had time to appear against him."

"Then you didn't know the dip?"

"The—oh, the pickpocket? I had seen him once or twice before."

That shattered decent caution. "You *knew* him?"

"Of course not!" Her chin went up. "I mean he had been following me, I'm sure, for some time, and I think ever since I left my grandfather's hotel rooms this afternoon. For a long while, I wasn't quite certain; then I didn't call an officer; and then you came along, and I was thinking about speaking to you when—well, when it happened—he snatched my bead bag."

Relief—followed by further puzzlement. "Speaking to me? Oh, yes, of course! I remember," said Sam. "You mistook me for somebody else, for an acquaintance of yours."

She smiled at him, and the lips that had thus far

been perhaps too straight under the stress of her need were now altogether delightful.

"How very stupid of you!"

"Not more than usually, as you'll find out when you know me better. Stupidity is my normal condition."

"Nonsense. You knew that *I* knew perfectly well I'd never set eyes on you before."

"Then why——"

"Haven't I," she impatiently inquired, "told you that I wanted to talk to you? With that fat policeman suspecting you, there was no way to get what I wanted except to do what I did."

Sam sighed. She was entirely too much for him. Most women always had been.

"All right," said he, "go on."

She went on—while the taxicab went on, too.

"At the very first, I was looking for somebody, you know, and it seemed right away to me that you might do."

"Thanks."

"Besides, I saw you had the Croix de Guerre."

Jefford's fingers itched to pluck the red-and-green ribbon from his dusty lapel.

"Everybody has that," he muttered.

Nevertheless, he knew that nobody had noted his example of it for many a long day. Not that he wanted them to! Only, could this be one of his fellow citizens and yet not oblivious to the World War? A queer sort of American girl. What was she saying now?

She was saying:

"And then when you ran after that man, I was certain——"

"Which way now, sir?"

There is a rudimentary conscience even in taxicab chauffeurs who have been given carte blanche. This chauffeur was shouting to his passengers over his quite too obviously uninquisitive shoulder.

Sam looked about him. Their car had paused before the equestrian General Sherman shining in bronze at the Plaza.

"Through the Park," said Jefford automatically.

But that was not what the driver wanted to know. It was what every man said when his cab hesitated at this particular spot.

"And then, sir?"

Sam looked at the girl. The girl shrugged. Evi-

dently she had more serious things to think about than their immediate destination.

"Straight on," said Jefford resignedly.

He had money enough for a long ride, anyhow. The chauffeur accepted the order. He and the girl proceeded.

"You've helped me," she said. "But I need more help. Lots—and much harder to get. I need it right away. It's a great deal to ask, but I don't know a soul who's in New York, in August, and I thought you might do, or tell me who would."

Sam laughed. He could do it now. He thought of his recent career and laughed bitterly.

"You've picked the most helpless human being in the world!" But her eyes showed hurt, so he hurriedly added: "Though of course I'll do anything I can."

"I'm sure you're not at all helpless. You've proved that already."

She had brightened. She shook an admonishing index finger at him, and this time he saw its stains more closely; iodine, for a certainty!

"I beg your pardon, but are you a nurse?"

"I've had three years of it at Smyrna, Scutari and Corfu. I got to New York only this afternoon."

"And at once went shopping," said he, looking at that so obviously new bead bag which had brought them together.

"Yes, but I had to; and now——"

She need not have feared; his levity was no more than superficial. He was remembering—what he seldom long forgot and less seldom spoke of—that shrapnel wound he had received at Montfaucon, and the following weeks at the base hospital when death had been imminent. They were weeks when overworked surgeons had to leave much to be done by overworked nurses. He owed a debt to her profession—he owed his life.

"Look here," he said, and he continued to look at her and saw new beauty in her face. "I told you I was helpless. I meant that. Ever since I was mustered out it's seemed as if I couldn't earn my own living. People that went over, before the Armistice or right after it, got into a way of looking at things that people who didn't go simply can't understand, so I don't blame anybody. But if you——" He took his resolve there and then! "If you think a

man like me can help a—a girl like you——" No going back, now; for all his quietness, Sam was made that way. "Why, well I'm on, that's all."

She, however, could be cautious. "You must tell me something about yourself."

The pedigree giving had been merely delayed. "There's nothing to tell—nothing interesting."

"There always is. Pretend I'm a questionnaire. Do you speak French?"

"Pure A. E. F."

"Where are you from? I know it's not New York."

Central Park was rolling away from them like a crazy moving picture ground backward. "How do you know that?"

"I just know. I knew it from the first. Since it isn't New York, where is it?"

"A place you never even heard of, Wallace, Wisconsin. It's in Sawyer County—if that helps you any—near the old Lac Court d'Oreilles Indian Reservation."

"Next of kin?"

"There ain't no sich animal."

"Business?"

"There you've got me. My father and mother died when I was a kid," he said more gravely, "and I hadn't any brothers or sisters, or much to speak of in the line of uncles and aunts. After I'd worked my way through college at Madison—any old job—I made a sort of living coaching amateur football teams in the fall. Sometimes that put aside enough, or almost enough, to pay for the summer. Then I got to be a reporter on the Hayward paper—that's the county town—and did lake-district correspondence, in the season, for the Milwaukee *Sentinel.* One or two big stories broke loose. Just by good luck, I caught a man wanted in St. Louis on a charge of murder, and so the *Sentinel* sent for me and gave me a place on its local staff. And a while after that the war broke out, and I went."

All the time that he was speaking, her eyes never left him, and he was uncomfortably sure that her quick brain was correctly filling the gaps his modesty left in this history. Born well to do, she had not served among war-refugees without learning the meaning of poverty. She understood what had shaped him: the penury so bitterly fought in boyhood, the honors on the University of Wisconsin's

diamond and gridiron; even his lone trailing of Missouri Mike from Upper St. Croix to Lake Namekagon, and the single-handed capture there effected, could not lie hid from her penetrating imagination.

Brief though he tried to be, by the time she let him finish this phase of his chronicle, they were skirting Harlem Mere. As the car turned into Seventh Avenue, she asked:

"And now your service record?"

That he gave her in still barer outline. No use. She had seen the French ribbon. Soon she knew how it was won and how he had won the D. S. C. as well. She knew about Montfaucon, about that affair at Fère-en-Tardenois and about his platoon's capture of the field battery at St. Mihiel. He wouldn't tell but she dug it out.

"And ever since that," he said, "I've made a living losing jobs."

They were nearing One Hundred and Twenty-first Street. He had a fixed belief that every woman owned two pairs of eyes, the second in the back of her head; now this woman confirmed his faith. Without turning, she lifted that admonitory finger and said quietly:

"For the last mile a car has been following us."

Sam rose and peered through the broken sheet of isinglass behind him. A car was close. To the right of its driver, but within, Jefford could see the flicker of a yellow necktie.

This was men's work; without permission or apology, he assumed command. He bent forward to their own chauffeur:

"There's a taxi trailing us. Five dollars if you can make a quick turn and block it!"

To snap at the reward was to whirl the steering-wheel so sharply that Sam was all but thrown out of the right-hand window. The girl looked out of the other.

Quick, however, as was the maneuver of their cab, that of the car in the rear was quicker. Perhaps the man with the yellow tie had realized that Sam recognized him. Orders besides Jefford's had, at all events, been issued, and, before anything else could happen, the taxi of the purse snatcher had circled its enemy and was tearing east along the cross street in the direction of Mount Morris Square.

"Follow!" Sam called to his chauffeur.

"No," said the girl, "don't. Turn around, please. We'll go downtown by the quickest way."

Evidently, Jefford's brief authority had terminated! He sulkily agreed. "But I'd like to know why," he said as they started southward.

"I told you I hadn't much time," she explained. "Have you anything at the place you live that you can't do without for a while?"

"Not a thing."

"Then you can send word from the boat to anybody that you ought to communicate with. You see, you've made me a very kind offer and now I'm quite sure that you are exactly the man I've been looking for." She glanced at a businesslike watch on her wrist. "It's just five thirty-four by the correct time. I want you to sail for Martinique with me at seven o'clock to-night."

CHAPTER V

TOWARD TROPIC SEAS

"MARTINIQUE?" repeated Sam. Hum!"

"Yes," said the girl. "Of course it's a rather long way from here——"

"I told you I'd take on your proposition, whatever it was," he reminded her. "Did you think I'd crawl, even if you'd picked on the Goorkha Craters via Shackleton's route?"

She nodded, as much in satisfaction with her own powers of choosing men as with Jefford the individual. "No, I didn't. But aren't you surprised?"

The human ability to appreciate surprise has its limits, and anybody in this young lady's company reached them soon. Sam told himself that the sight of her locking their chauffeur into the cab and then assuming his place at the steering wheel would not now surprise him. Because this was so, it seemed better unmentioned. He merely remarked:

"As a matter of fact, about an hour ago I was thinking about going there."

"Oh, you know the island?"

"Never been within three hundred miles of it."

"But you know somebody that lives there?"

"Not a soul."

"Then why——"

"Because it wasn't hot enough for me in New York. A bit later, because New York was too hot for me—I mean because there didn't seem to be a job left in the big town. Martinique, Guadeloupe—they just happened to be the first places that came into my mind. I suppose, if I'd picked on heaven, you'd have come along and offered me a chance to die."

Her practical ears did not heed the latter part of that speech. "You must understand that this *is* a job," she said.

"Afraid I'll mistake it for a joy ride and behave accordingly?"

"I know you won't. I am merely telling you that —that you are to consider it a business proposition —that you won't——" She hesitated, blushed,

looked down and concluded: "You won't suffer by it financially."

Sam grinned at last. "I need a vacation—without pay. Edison says the best vacation is a change of occupation. I'll have to trouble you to stand some of my expense, because my own cash won't hold out much farther than whatever degree of latitude Charleston's in, or on, or whatever it is. But if you talk to me about wages, I'll break my promise and my neck by jumping out of this taxi and leaving you to the mercies of the hot, hot world."

In the end, she had—even she—to let him have his way so far as this point was concerned.

"And now," he continued, "beyond the name of Martinique, although I seem to be started somewhere, I can't be said to know exactly where I'm going, can I? I haven't deserved much confidence from you so far—letting that thief slip through my fingers—but don't you think I might be of a little more intelligent help if you gave me whatever sort of explanation the circumstances permit?"

Not she! He had captured a short command in directing the attempt to stop that trailing automobile which bore Yellow Tie; again, he had been the mas-

ter in this decision against remuneration. She felt that she must resume her executive position at some time or other, and promptly decided upon the present instant for her coup d'état. She said:

"There are too many things to be done before we start if they are to be done at all. You—pardon me, but I'm sure you would be more comfortable if you didn't have to sit with your legs crossed all the way to Martinique. You got that tear in a good cause, but you would look more like what you looked like when I first saw you if you had a fresh suit of clothes. Do you want to go to your rooms, after all, and get one?"

That inquiry, whether intentionally framed or not, successfully diverted him. He did not want to go to his rooms "after all" for the excellent reason that the "all" was not worth the going after. He lied:

"There's a suit being built at my tailor's, but it won't be ready till——"

"Then, providing you don't mind ready-mades, here is what looks like a good store. I don't know much about such things, but isn't it?"

This was the start, and it did not belie a single one of the incidents that followed it. Though the

little matter of recalling the scanty nature of his wardrobe had shaken Sam's nerve and moved him, not, it is true, to retreat, but to hints for postponement, the girl overcame all his obstacles almost gleefully. There vanished before her impetuosity every one of the difficulties that, with the shrinking of the minutes, less incautious Jefford fancied he foresaw.

No collars? Well, they wouldn't turn back toward his rooms for them. He had bought a suit at one shop; he could purchase, certainly, collars at the first haberdasher's encountered on this, their journey to the docks.

Shirts?

Shirts ditto.

Ditto any other necessities.

Her impedimenta were already aboard.

Then Jefford bethought him of the passport problem.

It, too, she solved with a disdainful motion of her wand. She had made mention of a grandfather; he must be, Sam thought, as prophetic as resourceful. He had, it appeared, that invaluable asset known as "friends in Washington" and had left at his New York hotel—wherever he was now—one passport for

her and one for her cousin, a Mr. Titus Jones, whose appended photograph the seal of an unconsciously obliging state department had effectually blurred, whose signature she announced any child could, fortunately, imitate, and whose written description was exactly as undescriptive as every other passport description.

Sam was a very manly man, but it is precisely your manly man who cannot resist, in what he tries to persuade himself are minor matters, a really feminine woman. In her passion for management, this girl was really feminine. What wonder, then, that he who had been a brave soldier in war found no heart to renew his inquiries concerning their joint destiny until she chose to heed them? She had warmed him once more—this time at the cheerful fire of mystery. When at last she let him question it was with this announcement:

"I was a little bit afraid you might change your mind after all, if you weren't somewhere where you couldn't."

He couldn't here! They were stretched side by side on deck chairs. The torch-bearing towers of Manhattan had sunk to a diffused glow on the north-

western horizon; Sandy Hook was astern, and already the Navesink lights winked faintly on the steamer's starboard bow. Passengers were few on this hot-weather voyage southward, and of all the *St. Basile's* company every one save this pair of impulsive rovers had gone below.

"H'm!" said Sam. He wouldn't have changed his mind, of course, but he was again less enthusiastic than, at certain moments, he had been. Indeed, having risen from the mixed drinks of his virtual discharge at the hands of Branson and the spirit of adventure evoked by this incomprehensible and determined girl, the intoxication of his enlistment on an unknown quest was, in the coolness of the night at sea, beginning to subside. Jefford wondered, indeed, if it had not been dropped with the pilot. "Suppose you let me have the story now and hold me so that I don't try to swim ashore."

"It's long," said the girl, "and it begins away back before my time."

"It could do that without running into the mediæval period of history, and the longer it is," murmured Jefford, somehow more mollified, "the stronger the reason for beginning it early."

"Very well. My name," said the girl, "is Marcia Maynard."

Sam nodded. He thought it a pleasant name, but he thought it more conventional not to say so in the present unconventional circumstances.

"Two weeks ago, at our refugee hospital in Corfu," Miss Maynard went on, "I got a letter, delayed in transit, from my grandfather—excepting my mother's nephew, Titus Jones, he's my only surviving relative—Benjamin F. Maynard, of Philadelphia. You may have heard of him."

"Yes." Jefford was familiar with the reputation of the retired merchant, turned philanthropist, whose bearing of the name of "Poor Richard's" creator accorded so ill with his religious profession as a Quaker.

"That letter," Miss Maynard said, "reminded me of a queer settlement that was falling due, and that I'd heard about years ago. The settlement required my grandfather's presence in Martinique, and now he wrote he was going there and wanted me to meet him on his return, because he proposed to make over to me part of his share in the settlement. My work in Corfu was nearly finished, and I could

give some or all of the money to the hospital. He always kept rooms at a New York hotel, and I was to go straight there. The settlement day in Martinique will be the day following the one when this ship is due to arrive at Fort-de-France. When I got to those rooms this morning—my boat was three days late—I found somebody had just rifled them—and yet a lot of valuables were left behind."

"So you called up the police?" asked Sam.

"No."

Sam sat up. This *was* a remarkable girl!

"Why didn't you call 'em? I suppose you planned to catch the thieves yourself?"

"I went to the desk," said Miss Maynard quietly, "and before I could make a complaint, the mail clerk, who was standing beside the room clerk, handed me a cable message that made me think perhaps I'd better *not* tell what had happened. The message was signed 'Grandpa,' and it instructed me to come to Martinique at once and to show the cable to the hotel manager, which would make him give me an envelope that had been left for delivery to me in case of just this sort of thing occurring."

"What was in that envelope?"

"A certified check, steamship tickets, the passports, and this letter."

She drew from the fateful bead bag a much crumpled epistle.

"May I read it?" asked Sam.

"I want you to."

He took the letter and stepped to a near-by deck light. He read:

> DEAR MARCIA: This is to be given thee in case there is need for a little help in Martinique, as I sometimes suspect that there will be. Thee is at once to telegraph Cousin Titus and summon him from Germantown. Then thee and Titus are to take the indicated ship, and he to proceed to the Plantation of the Sept Amis for further instructions from me. Titus is strong and brave, and there should be no danger for thee, though I recommend that thee stop in Fort-de-France and let him go on alone. There should be ample time in New York for preparations.
>
> Thy loving Friend and Grandfather,
>
> BENJAMIN F. MAYNARD.

Divinity and journalism are the only two professions that do not depend on the commonplace. A

theologian Jefford had never been, but a few short hours ago he was a reporter whose livelihood depended on the sure frequency of marvels in everyday life—and life's everyday marvels had bored him. Marvels? He didn't then know what the word meant!

"Your grandfather," said he to Miss Maynard, "is—h'm—an unusual sort of person." It was reluctantly that Sam returned the letter.

"Yes, grandpa loves to do things in that quick, secret way," said the girl, and, though she sat in shadow, Jefford felt the smile of indulgence with which she spoke, "so I wasn't surprised at this; but it did make me remember that he didn't like his private affairs to get into the newspapers, and I thought I'd better not mention the condition of his rooms. Then, as his first letter had been late and my boat was delayed, I realized I had just time to call Titus and catch the *St. Basile.*"

"Why didn't you call him? Of course, I'm glad you didn't; but why——"

"I did—right away. I phoned my cousin's

house, and the answer came back that he was seriously ill."

"And then?"

"Well, grandpa evidently wanted a man there in Martinique. A certain sort of man, like Titus——"

"Am I like him?" Why Sam hoped he was he didn't know; but he did hope it.

"Never mind. I mean—you understand perfectly well—the sort. I had to buy a new bead bag, anyhow—my old one was worn out—so I just went around town, and, not knowing anybody to ask advice of in what seemed to be such a confidential matter, I thought I'd look out for somebody that looked likely."

"Good heavens!" gasped Jefford. He had been wrong, she *could* still surprise him.

"I'm an excellent judge of character," she serenely explained. "It is one of the two or three things I'm really good at—judging character on first sight. But New York didn't seem to be the best ground for growing what I was hunting for."

"I'd like to know what that was," said Sam.

"I won't flatter you by telling you in so many words. I'll say just this: I'd almost given up when

I saw you. You looked—not so far wrong as most of the others. You'd been a soldier—you'd been a good soldier. Then, when you were so quick and brave about that pickpocket—yes, you were!"—she shook her finger at her protesting auditor—"why, I chose you."

Jefford didn't mind laughing compliments that he asked for, but he dreaded praise. Now, at its near approach, he wriggled uncomfortably.

"You said this story started before your time. Let's get back to its start."

"That was fifty years ago——" she began.

CHAPTER VI

SURVIVORS' LUCK

FIFTY years ago! Less some few sunrises and sunsets, an even half century since!

Five long decades before this August night of stars at sea which strange fortune brought to Marcia Maynard and ex-Lieutenant Samuel Jefford aboard the *St. Basile* bound for Fort-de-France, a group of young men—how young they were, so very long ago—had gathered in a sort of annual reunion of their company of seven in the little town of Americus, in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. They were all in their early twenties then, feeling themselves vastly aged; but, for one long evening in one month out of every twelve, they had agreed to forego youth's weighty sense of its maturity.

These fellows had been adventure-loving boys together. Together they had entered school; together played truant among the wooded hills. They boated together on the lovely and treacherous Susquehanna,

rescued one another from its perils, camped as a severely exclusive party on its islands. They graduated from the Americus high school in the same class and went into business, though separately, at the same time. Then, on Saturday nights, they indulged in rather reckless, yet ever good-natured, games of poker—even that one of them, Ben Maynard, who was of the Quaker persuasion.

Those were, at the time of the gathering now in question, the yesterdays that they could in common look back upon. Some of them had drifted to other towns, or to larger and scattered cities; but yearly these came back to Americus, put on the old daring with those who had remained, and renewed the memories and amusements of their high-school era.

The present occasion, however, differed somewhat painfully from any of its predecessors. An honored rule had been disastrously violated; a too-persuasive stranger—a commercial traveler visiting the place—was admitted to the little game at the Tremont House. He cleaned his friendly opponents of all the loose money in their clothes and promptly departed by the first available train with most of their ready cash in his possession, and much of their good

humor. Though he never appeared again in the biographies of the Seven, his success was to affect fatally the careers of at least four of them and to influence the lives of other persons then unborn.

Some artificial aid seemed required to restore the young men's spirits, and, after it had been perhaps somewhat too liberally provided, two of them, Maynard and Ripley, who, being unable to go to Europe had recently voyaged to the West Indies, began to brag of the industrial opportunities of Martinique and to compare the Seven's lot with what they thought it ought to be. It was the natural reaction of young blood against the consequences of inexperience.

"Sugar and rum!" cried florid Theodore Ripley, always a rather violent lad. "There's a fortune in them down there for what would be no investment at all in the United States! And look at us. What are you worth, Blunston? What are you earning, Opie? How much did you and Buckner save last year, Tollens?"

He ran through the list. They disappointed his eloquence by giving a fair account of themselves. As

such things went at that time, they were not doing badly for young men of their years.

"Well enough for yourselves!" shouted the not-to-be-silenced Ripley. "But what about your children?"

They laughed. Only one of them was married, and he was childless.

Yet in the end the pleader fired them. This was that period in America's financial history when the Last-man Club flourished and Lorenzo Tonti's primitive, but adventurous, theory of life insurance reached the apex of its popularity.

"We've been gambling and lost to an outsider," said Ripley. "Why don't we gamble among ourselves again, but do it in such a way that one of us, and maybe most, is sure to quit almost a millionaire?"

"A millionaire?" mocked Opie, but his eyes glowed.

"Yes," Ripley reasserted.

"Seven millionaires?" inquired cynical Blunston, in his slow way. He had inherited a substantial property in real estate, but it was heavily mortgaged, and even his doubting character and the pretended

scorn of new-made wealth that he copied from his first-settler ancestors was not quite proof against the lure in Ripley's words.

"Seven," persisted the enthusiast, "if we all live long enough."

"And if we don't?" Buckner asked.

"Then so much more for those who do."

Tollens laughed his interest. He looked at the more cautious Maynard. "Is there really money down there waiting for somebody to pick it?"

The young Quaker nodded. He had not his traveling companion's genius for zeal, but he was known to possess the business instinct, so now his silent assent brought the quality of conviction.

"Oh, just wait!" Ripley urged them all. "We'll show you. We'll prove our case! Ben, those papers that we brought along—where are they?"

Thus, urged, Maynard produced maps, plans, certifications, estimates, which had come with him from the far-away St. Pierre, then, as now, little more than a lovely name to citizens of the United States. Bending feverishly over these documents, the excited Ripley showed his companions a sugar plantation that, according to his figures, could not fail to

grow a fortune. When the careful Quaker's word again supported that of the zealot and succinctly vouched for the credibility of the Martinique documents, the old spirit once more flickered; when Theodore proposed his tontine the flame leaped high.

"If it's all so sure, though," persisted Blunston, "why don't you men keep it to your two selves?"

"Because we haven't got the small necessary capital for the initial investment," said Ripley.

Opie wanted to know why they didn't borrow it.

"We have no friends that can advance it," Ben Maynard explained, "or that are willing to do so in distant securities."

"But all of a sudden," Ripley supplemented, "I felt sure you fellows would come in if I made the proposition something different from a loan—if you could all be equal owners with us—if we took the thing in hand on a basis of share and share alike."

He launched forth again, and with renewed eloquence. Again he demonstrated the opportunities for profit, and then he descended to detail. Each of the seven was to contribute a sum well within his present means, a ridiculous two hun-

dred and fifty dollars, which, however, would buy the plantation on a mortgage—that for the smaller size thus achieved would be readily secured—and which, moreover would pay the initial wages and the starting salary of the local trustee-manager. Seven contributions of one hundred and fifty dollars a year for five years would clear the indebtedness. At the end of that time the plantation would be paying its own running expenses and piling up money.

"No one of us'll feel his investment," said Ripley. "In no time it will be paid-up endowment policy for the winners. We start fair and no handicaps; we're all about of an age and all in good health. In fifty years, that estate will be worth at the very least a cool million and will have that much more on interest at the Banque Martinique in Fort-de-France. Nothing can stop it! Well, in fifty years from to-morrow, the survivors will present themselves at the plantation with proof of their identity, and the manager will have the cash on hand for equal divisions among the claimants and be ready to make a sale, if the remaining owners want one."

The advocate had won his case. His audience was so strongly with him that already, in a few of them, cupidity began to evince itself against the others.

"Present in person," stipulated Buckner, who, having been an athlete, thought himself likely to be the best preserved. "No invalids need apply—at second hand."

They were young—they agreed.

"And another thing," demanded Tollens, who, having been lately disappointed in love, wanted his friends to know it, "I'll never marry, so it's only fair to me to make it so's the fund goes to nobody but one of us charter members. It can't descend to any heirs of those who fail to appear."

They were indeed so very young that they all agreed to this also; if none survived the fortune should be divided between the Doncaster County Hospital and the Hôtel de Dieu at Fort-de-France. Tollens married three months later, but three months later was too late.

The Seven, with a bit more artificial assistance, worked on a rough draft of the plan all that night and long after dawn. It was to be put into proper

legal form by the French consul at Philadelphia, one copy given each member and the original deposited in the Banque Martinique.

At last, in the full light of day, their work was finished. Ripley put the paper in his pocket, along with the necessary checks. They all walked over to Elm Avenue for a breath of morning air. As they arrived at the corner, the opera house clock rang nine.

"Nine o'clock, gentlemen," announced Ripley. "At nine a. m. sharp at the *Plantation des Sept Amis,* on the Grand Chemin de St. André in Martinique, fifty years from this minute, August 27, 1925, those of us who are still living will divide two million dollars in cash, real estate and machinery, share and share alike!"

CHAPTER VII

A YELLOW NECKTIE

"AND everything was arranged according to Mr. Ripley's plan," continued the girl aboard the *St. Basile* to Sam Jefford beside her.

From her chair, she was looking over the rail, as if the black horizon were that very curtain of darkness through which forces, set in motion so far away and long ago, had pierced at last to drive her and this man, whom she had first met only a few hours since, into their present strange intimacy.

By every provision of that law which attracts man to woman, his eyes should have been all for her. Until a moment since, they had been. Now, however, they were oddly roving—roving quickly and stealthily. Nothing had been consciously seen or heard to justify their present infidelity, but, even in his matter-of-fact brain, some subtle sense was alarmed.

Marcia might have shared this primitive emotion, but she was too preoccupied with her narrative. Unheeding, she went on:

"The plantation was bought——"

"Wait!"

Sam's eyes again swept the deck that had been, a few minutes since, save for these Americans, deserted. Now he was sure that he did see something possibly worth investigation, and he rose quickly.

"Stay where you are!" he cautioned the girl, who was too much taken by surprise to disobey him.

Lightly Jefford ran forward. An agile shadow, he thought, retreated before him.

He hurried on, but that moving shadow melted into the solid blackness of the *St. Basile's* superstructure. When Sam reached the bridge stairs, all that he met was a sailor who had just descended them.

"What was it?" His companion's voice, as Jefford returned to her side, was quite calm, but her tone was insistent.

He laughed and began the rolling of a cigarette. "Something I didn't know I owned—nerves." He

quickly explained his mistake and then sought to resume their former conversation. "And the plantation was a success?"

Did she, in her heart, accept his reassurance? He couldn't be sure. For his own part, there seeming to be no reasonable explanation for what had happened save the explanation he offered, he was compelled to accept it. Women, on the other hand, instinctively realize mere reason's fallibility. Was his companion applying such a discount in the instance before her? In any event, she made no comment; instead, she answered his question as if nothing had occurred to interrupt the tenor of her narrative.

"Yes, the plantation was a success even beyond the figures Mr. Ripley had named. But gradually the reunions were given up; the men drifted farther and farther apart. Only a couple of the owners stayed in Americus—Mr. Tollens and Mr. Blunston." Sam could distinguish her gesture as she counted them on her fingers. "One of the seven, a Mr. Kepler, started a store in Montreal. Mr. Buckner practiced law in Savannah; Mr. Opie got into something—I think it was horse breeding or horse rac-

ing—near Louisville; grandfather, you know, was in Philadelphia, and Mr. Ripley went out to San Francisco. I never heard what his business was."

"I guess the plantation manager sent them yearly statements?"

"Certified by the Banque Martinique. The bank was a sort of head overseer."

"From Fort-de-France?"

"Exactly."

Sam recalled that terrible volcanic disaster that most of us think of when we think at all of Martinique. "Lucky they didn't bank in St. Pierre!"

"Grandpa told me he was afraid the plantation was ruined when he heard about the Pelée eruption. He went down to see; indeed, that was the last time he was there. Poor Monsieur Monnier, the manager, lived in St. Pierre and was killed, and grandpa had to send the news to Monsieur Monnier's son in Paris by cabling him to come home and take over the management; but the volcano had done all its damage on the other side of the mountain from the estate."

"And the whole seven are alive to-day? Speaks well for Pennsylvania longevity."

"Oh, no, they're not all alive! The last time I heard about them, the only ones left were Mr. Buckner, Mr. Ripley, Mr. Opie and my grandfather."

There was a moment's silence. He knew that his companion's thoughts must be traveling that same puzzled track which was being traveled by his own speculations. Why not speak out? At last he did:

"Buckner, Ripley and Opie—which of 'em put that cross-eyed rat of a purse snatcher on your trail as soon as you'd landed? And why did he want to trail *you?*"

She had too much common sense to protest politely the combined innocence of her grandfather's former friends.

"Yes," she said quietly, "that's the new part of my problem—the problem you're to help me to solve. One of them must have done it. Which? I don't know. I wish I could guess. But, yes, it does stand to reason that the thing must have something to do with this Martinique plantation, doesn't it?"

"Considering that the thief left things of value

untouched in those hotel rooms, it's a cinch it does. What was in your bead bag?"

"I told you. The steamship tickets and so on."

"Nothing else?"

"No."

"No papers? You haven't any papers connected with this tontine scheme?"

"Why should I have? Not one."

"And Mr. Maynard wasn't likely to have left any behind him when he sailed—by oversight, in the hotel room, I mean?" Sam persisted.

She shook her head. "You don't know grandpa!"

"But perhaps the thief didn't either—thoroughly. Somebody must want something that somebody thinks you now have. What is that? *What?*"

Though they wondered long, they parted for the night with that question unanswered, and throughout their voyage the puzzle remained insoluble. Sam put a thousand queries which led to nothing; Marcia as many guesses, which he could at once confute. Both could disprove; neither could construct. He rolled cigarettes, and she shook her finger quite in vain.

"We'll go crazy if we keep this up," said Sam at last.

"Then we'd better drop it," she smiled.

Whereupon they began it again.

"We'll have to wait till we see grandpa," she would say, and he would agree. And they wouldn't wait.

Except for the usual disturbances of Gulf Stream journeying, the *St. Basile* had nothing to sigh for. From a mariner's point of view, the voyage was without incident. The visible passengers, whom Sam inspected with a suspicion that had no reward, were for the most part good sailors—natives or residents of one or another of the West Indies returning home; an invalid or two, seeking a sea respite; a scattering of American salesmen—and Miss Maynard and Jefford, good sailors too, found, until the eve of their arrival at Fort-de-France, no complaint to make of either the ship or its company.

Then, however, something happened which bore distinctly upon their enigma. The girl, anxious to be fresh for the morrow's landing, said good night earlier than usual and went directly toward her stateroom. It was amidships, at the end of a brief

corridor opening off the main hallway, and its twin ports gave on the starboard side of the promenade deck. At the junction of the major and minor passages a cabin steward was always seated, below a call-bell indicator, but he was generally dozing, so that Marcia, though the weather compelled her to sleep with her door on the hook, made a practice of locking her cabin whenever she left it. That key had always worked easily. This time she had some trouble.

Convinced that his supposed eavesdropper of their first few hours aboard was indeed some optical delusion, Sam had said no more about it; but there remained enough atmosphere of mystery around his mission to quicken suspicion at the least excuse. She asked herself if this lock could have been tampered with.

She roused the steward.

"Has anybody been trying to get into my state-room—anybody that oughtn't to?"

The steward regarded her out of heavy eyes.

"Me, I of course prepared the bed, mademoiselle. But that anybody else should enter? Impossible!

I have been here from the moment that mademoiselle departed."

Marcia's shrug was as French as the fluent Gallic speech in which she had addressed him. The man shrugged in return, sat down again and, as he was seating himself, again fell asleep.

She went into the cabin. Nothing had been disturbed there. Thinking that her puzzlement over her private problem was stirring fancies in her brain, she calmly prepared for sleep. Nevertheless, when she hung the door on its hook, she put a chair behind the portal and wound the curtain around the chair to hold it in place. She had no more idea than heretofore as to what any marauder could want among her possessions, but she took the precaution of putting her bead bag under her pillow.

It was long before she could gain oblivion, much as she wanted rest. The riddle that she couldn't solve ran around and around inside her head; it was banished only to return from every Elba to which she sent it. When, at last, she found a St. Helena for it, a half dozen lesser, but equally persistent, bothers took up its work. Though both

ports were open, the room was hot. The bunk had never been so hard; her pillows grew increasingly uncomfortable; the light from the corridor was glaring against her eyes.

Again and again she consulted that wrist watch on the reliability of which she set such store, and almost doubted this old friend's record of how slowly the hours dragged. She dreamed a little—woke—dreamed again and again awoke. It was at the dead of night that she at last fell into a sleep heavy as can be no slumber except that which is too long delayed.

Such sleep is close kin to death, and when Marcia realized herself to be returning toward consciousness, it was as if she were indeed climbing out of a grave. The progress was painful. Why was she making it? She did not know; she knew only that she must. It seemed that the weight of six feet of earth made it impossible to move with speed, yet some obscure sentinel of her soul was urging her at least to perseverance. Upward she toiled, and upward—and then suddenly she realized that it was well she had not started into full life.

Somebody else was in the stateroom.

The corridor light had been extinguished. She could see nothing; but, because she was blind, she heard with an acuteness that her ears, always good, had never before achieved. The sea was calm; the ship steady; there was no groaning of timbers, only the plash of waves—yet, above the sound of the water outside, came the sound of delicate and stealthy movement just here within.

It drew nearer. Not only could she hear it now—she felt it, the presence of a human being malignly intentioned.

Slowly—very slowly—with a caution that equaled the intruder's, Marcia raised her fingers to the wall and groped for the button of the call bell that was somewhere there. She did not move her head and yet she detected the faintest disturbance of her pillow. A tiny breath touched her upturned cheek.

She pushed the button. With what from its rapid sequence might have been a part of the same movement she clutched with both hands at the darkness beside her and caught and held some soft object.

There was a cry, startled, but muffled, too. Her fingers had closed on a piece of silk. Something—it must have been a fist—whistled past her head; it missed her in the darkness. Then there was a rush and she knew the room was empty.

Marcia snapped on the light.

She was still holding that which she had seized. It was a yellow bow tie sparkling with red polka dots.

CHAPTER VIII

HAND OVER HAND

RAPIDLY, Marcia's practical blue eyes reviewed the field. Against a deft thief her precautions had been hopelessly inefficient. She saw that the door hook had been slipped, the curtain easily disentangled and the reënforcing chair—a device evidently familiar—shoved easily and quietly away.

"Did mademoiselle ring?" inquired a drowsy voice from behind the scatterings of her poor defense.

The wretched steward was gaping in at her. His red knuckles prodded his heavy lids.

One glance at him sufficed the girl. The creature was too stupid to be *particeps criminis,* but too stupid, also, to have any information worth the getting. Small use to question such a somnolent animal.

"No," she fibbed. Then discretion momentarily halted disgust. Small use to question him—but might not the smallest use prove a factor that it

would be unwise to neglect in such a maze? "You've been asleep?" she grudgingly inquired.

"But yes, mademoiselle."

"You have, consequently, seen nobody prowling about here?"

The steward achieved a heavy gesture. "At such an hour? Who is there that would want to leave his bed at such an hour?"

Discretion, for one more time, had demonstrated itself as the weak quality that her impulsive nature was always prone to regard it. "Then good night," she said. "Or good morning!"

"But was that what mademoiselle wanted? She says she did not ring, yet I was well sure that I heard a bell. I am very alert, me; and the indicator just above my head there——"

"Oh, go away!" cried Marcia, and slammed the door upon him.

She was at least relieved to be quit of his lethargic presence; then ashamed that she should have summoned him, and soon merely contrite enough to vow an increase of his tip on the morrow as expiation for her show of anger. Admirable in many respects, she resembled most of us in one;

all her life long she had had to fight for the elusive art of self-control. During three years of heart-breaking hospital work overseas, she thought it securely mastered; but lately—well, ever since she descended the gangplank of that homecoming steamer at New York, events had contrived against her. When you are a nurse having only patients to deal with, a superior serenity is, she now realized, readily obtainable. When, however, such serene superiority strikes the solid rock of such a character as Sam Jefford's, it is not the rock that is likely to suffer.

Well, in the present crisis, nothing, she was certain, had been lost, anyway—nothing, that is, except her temper. Marcia tried to consider the situation calmly.

She held in her hands all the concrete evidence obtainable; to wit, that abominable yellow necktie. For the rest, she saw in the gaping of that suit case which was her sole piece of luggage, enough traces of what had happened to appease her until dawn. The case lay where she kept it, on a long seat under the ports, but though she never left it locked—there being in it nothing of value—

she always left it closed; now, of course, it was open. The contents had quite clearly been pawed over by the owner of the necktie; but no item of its inventory was missing, as she quickly determined. What then? Marcia hated scenes as devoutly as any other woman of her sort; she understood the futility of disturbing any of the *St. Basile's* officers at this time of night, and she would not rouse Sam. Clearly, she must wait patiently until the morning.

That she did. She did it full dressed and seated on the traitor chair.

Nor was any mere ship authority the object of her first interest when at last the day dawned. The object of her interest was Jefford. After a hurried cup of coffee, she sought him on deck and told the whole story of her night's adventure.

Their ship was on time to the second. Rugged and green, a tall parade of mountains that wear cloaks of jungle, the western shores of volcanic Martinique were slipping past. Cape St. Martin had been rounded an hour since. Already the Carbet Peaks rose ahead, and here on the port side —for they ran close in—the passengers could make

out gray bones of masonry peeping through a verdant pall of bush and parasitic vine. The eyes of nearly all the early risen ship's company were looking at the ruins of St. Pierre, where, a score of years before, twenty-eight thousand lives had been snuffed out in forty-five seconds by the fire and gases of enraged Pelée that now towered, purple and glowering, behind the waste land, and brooded with morose satisfaction over the scene of its fatal labors.

A tragedy two decades old is, however, too old for youth, and Jefford and Marcia had a pressing problem of their own. He heard her hurried tale at the spot where she encountered him, for there was no stopping her; and he listened with a face unchanged because he could not guess who might be watching them. At her first pause, however, he drew her to the deserted starboard side and there made her more deliberately repeat the little chronicle.

"Where's that tie?" he then demanded.

Marcia produced it. From the way she held the thing, it might have been the property of a victim of the bubonic plague.

"Yes, that's the purse snatcher's," said Sam. He wished it wasn't.

"If I'd only thought of turning on the light instead of ringing for that silly steward," said the girl, "we should have been sure."

"We're sure as it is. I'd know that rag anywhere."

He was for an immediate turning of the ship inside out, but here it was she who advocated delay.

"We must see the captain himself. He can inquire quietly, but he's on the bridge now—look! No, we must wait till the pilot comes aboard and relieves him. Grandfather hates publicity, you know."

Jefford was a little bored with grandfather and had for some time, besides, been chafing at what he considered the entirely unfitting subserviency to which this young woman's manner, otherwise charming, perpetually relegated Sam himself. He frowned at her.

"Look here, Mar——" He stopped in the midst of her Christian name; he stopped also an impulsive movement of his hands that had been intended to seize hers. He changed the movement to the

taking of that offensive tie. "Look here, Miss Maynard," he corrected himself, "somebody's got to be the boss of our expedition——"

"Of course," she agreed, smiling in spite of her perplexity, "and I'm it."

"Not at all. If my job is to take care of you——"

Her blue eyes widened. "But that's not your job!"

"Then what is? Your blessed grandfather wrote that he suspected there'd be need of a bit of help——"

"For him. He was addressing me."

"Well, anyway, he specified that he wanted a—a——" Mr. Maynard had indicated qualities that Sam couldn't apply to himself if he wanted to preserve his modesty. He had to stop.

Not so the girl. "'Strong and brave,'" she quoted from that note which the mail clerk of the Palmerston had handed her. She had noted her companion's confusion and meant to take mocking advantage of it. "But he carefully said that there would most likely be no danger for me."

"I don't care *what* he said!" announced the red-

dened Jefford. "I'm here, for whatever reason, and I propose——"

His proposition did not then take verbal form. Something else in verbal form interrupted.

From among the seaward-cast shadows of the mountains, huddled and interpeaked in the direction of Morne au Boeuf, a couple of small boats had made their way. Now, aboard ship, there rose the cry of *"Le pilote!"* as one of these craft came alongside.

The pilot scrambled up the side of the *St. Basile.* As he was doing so, from the lee of his boat darted the other, motor driven. It rounded the steamer's stern and paused below that end of the less-observed side which was farther from where Sam and Marcia were standing.

"Look!" cried the girl.

Hand over hand down a swaying rope an agile figure was descending. Jefford bent across the rail. The fugitive's face was for one moment upraised—the rat face of their enemy.

"Stop!"

Sam's voice thundered the command, but nobody heeded him. The passengers, gathered on the land

side did not hear the shout, which merged into a scream from the vessel as it acknowledged the pilot's arrival. The runaway leaped for the expectant motor boat, and it immediately flew away toward the shore whence it had put out. Not a moment had been wasted in the painstakingly arranged transfer.

Dragging the girl with him, Sam ran to the bridge ladder to inform the captain. A stolid sailor stood at its foot.

"*Defendu, m'sieu'.*" His sheer bulk barred the way.

"But, look here, there's a fellow—a thief——"

Still that vast body denied them progress. "I regret."

Jefford's French proved as fluent as Marcia's, but it availed them nothing. The man's honest face forbade bribery; his clear devotion to the letter of his orders forestalled both argument and pleading, and the girl herself prohibited Sam's indulgence of a plain desire to appeal to force.

"It is always forbidden passengers to go upon the bridge," said the sailor, as if repeating a well-learned lesson. "Should you wish indeed to see

the captain, you must wait until he has turned over the ship to the pilot. He is doing it now. Then he will descend. It will not be a little minutes."

"You see," growled Sam to his companion, "I *ought* to be boss! If you'd let me start something when I wanted to, that crook would never have made his get-away."

Said Marcia coolly: "Oh, no; it was too late even then—or most likely it was." She was not going to admit error! "And now we must just wait in quiet for that little minute."

They waited five long ones. The tricky motor boat had scudded out of sight before smiling, easy-going Captain Puaux came down to them.

He heard their appeals with an attention that was a trifle too ready to be effective. He stroked his blond Norman beard.

"I am desolated that the man has got away," said he; "but this sort of thing happens to a frequency here. You understand, the port authorities of Fort-de-France are very severe—very strict—and, for natives returning home and anxious to evade the police for one reason or another, this mode of landing is all but general."

The good commander sent orders to the purser to discover quietly what passenger had disappeared. Pending the determination of that inquiry, he showed an affable inclination to quiet his petitioners by talking about Martinique.

"It is fifty beautiful miles long; twenty miles of riotous flowers wide; and a fourth of it all-to-made devastated when this so terrible volcano blew away its miserable head of a pig! Ah well, except back there near St. Pierre itself—or what was one time St. Pierre—you would not suppose!"

"About this crook——" said Sam.

"We shall hear in good time—what we shall hear. They are a clever people, these islanders. You will find them interesting, and so *sympathique!* The Indians told Columbus—you knew that it has been proved that he was really a Frenchman, monsieur, *hein?* But yes, they told Columbus that this was the Isle of Matinino and that all the inhabitants were women. The women are indeed what one remembers, being the most beautiful in the West Indies, though to be sure not comparable," he bowed toward Marcia, "with the ladies of North America."

The girl turned abruptly with a stifled sound.

"Exactly," said Jefford to Captain Puaux, "but to get back to this crook——" It was the purser, after all, who saved the situation. He had really made excellent haste and now came in person to report that the passenger from Stateroom 28 was missing.

Steward said that this personage had kept to his cabin throughout nearly all the voyage. Otherwise there was nothing peculiar on record concerning him, save that last night he sent up for transmission a wireless message, in code, directed simply "Tigre, Morne au Boeuf," an unregistered telegraphic address.

"When did he come aboard at New York?" asked Sam.

The thorough purser had somehow got that information also. The same missing individual had not booked before the *St. Basile's* departure; he attracted attention at the gangplank by hurrying up it just as it was to be hauled in. Nay, Mr. Purser himself remembered——

"What name?"

"Name?" A shrug for that, as who should say,

"What mattered a name to one of these islanders?" However, there was some name given? "Yes. Zénon Aubin."

"And he looked like a rat?" Jefford pressed. "And he wore a yellow necktie with red polka dots?"

He did indeed. The purser was impressed. Not so the captain.

The *St. Basile* was now turning Negro Point and, on the plain at the foot of low green hills, Fort-de-France spread her red-tiled roofs and promiscuous palm trees before them. Here was the cathedral's spire, pointing to heaven; above the town, crouched forbiddingly the black mass of the Fort Bourbon, and at the sea front, with half its walls awash, the Fort St. Louis raised its surly and neglected front.

"You see," said Captain Puaux, referring not to the view, but to the information left by the departing purser, "it is quite evidently as I said—some returning minor criminal." The speaker waited applause. When none came from his auditors he serenely supplied it. "Ah, we have system aboard my ship—system!"

Sam looked at Marcia; she at him. "What's the use?" asked the eyes of each. And both blue eyes and hazel silently answered: "None!"

The captain saw it and put the question that in his place Sam would have put at the start of their long interview.

"Was it of much value, that which was abstracted from your cabin, mademoiselle? Tell me—in order that I may make my formal report to the Fort-de-France police, if you please—the value of the articles secured."

"There wasn't anything taken——" began Marcia.

"And that," Sam sought to explain, "is just the queer thing about the whole business."

It proved a fatal admission.

"But nothing?" These crazy Americans! Who could ever become used to them? Why object to people coming into your stateroom so long as they took nothing out? Captain Puaux was too polite to show much annoyance, but even his tact betrayed the conviction that his time was being consumed by excitable triflers. "Why then, my dear mademoiselle and monsieur, why all this agitation?" And, before either Marcia or Jefford could reply

he prepared to leave them with a paternal smile. "Ah, well, I myself, when first I left my home at Barfleur and sailed here to the islands—myself, I used to excite myself over their peculiarities. But one finds soon in the tropics that one should take all things quietly."

CHAPTER IX

FOLLOWED?

THE captain had bowed and retreated. About his departing shoulders and back there was something imperturbable and final.

"Well," gasped Jefford, "of all the——"

"Oh," said Marcia, perhaps because she really felt in part responsible, "I suppose it really doesn't matter."

From the east, where, like a man of leisure with his after-breakfast cigar, Mont Pelée softly puffed spirals at the glittering sky, Sam removed his hazel eyes and looked at the girl. Her treasure of surprises was apparently unlimited! His forehead puckered.

"Doesn't matter?" he repeated. "Then why did you—but never mind. I just wish I knew what our cross-eyed friend was after!"

"Don't you understand me?" she asked. "I see now what I was too excited to see at first. We

needed that dose of Captain Puaux's common sense, even if he's mistaken. I mean that if what happened last night and in New York didn't happen to have anything to do with grandpa, it doesn't count; and if it had we'll find out as soon as grandpa comes aboard the ship."

Mr. Maynard was not, however, among those who climbed the *St. Basile's* side from the swarming boats of the harbor. Below were brightly clad natives offering basketware for sale; up the gangways trooped pompous-looking yet soft-voiced and polite medical inspectors and customs officers, with a few citizens come to welcome expected passengers; yet, though the Americans waited long, Marcia's grandfather did not appear. The girl checked her disappointment.

"He must be on the wharf," she said, and tried to search the faces there.

Jefford said nothing. He began to doubt.

Side by side, in growing, but unspoken anxiety, the pair waited. They waited until the last rowboat was leaving. Then, with a quiet assumption of authority, Sam said, "We'd better go."

Silently, she submitted. He had picked up her suit case. Lips set tight, she followed him.

Their transfer to a craft which danced uncertaintly upon a none-too-steady azure sea, their bronze oarsmen with bared chests, even, as they landed, the jostling by grinning blacks who rolled huge hogsheads of sugar into a four-master beside the pier, passed Sam's troubled consciousness as no more than so many flashes of a cinematograph. He led Marcia in and out among the waterside throng.

"Do you see him?"

She shook her head. Her smile was brave, but her cheeks pale. Mr. Maynard simply wasn't there.

They found a port office, and Jefford telephoned every hotel and inn of Fort-de-France, Marcia standing quietly by the while. No B. F. Maynard—no trace or memory of him.

What she felt, Jefford's companion did not say. What she said was: "Of course grandpa didn't say he'd meet the boat. He's probably waiting at the plantation."

"H'm," said Sam, meditatively pouring tobacco into rice paper. That operation successfully ac-

complished, he glanced up, but pretended not to read her thoughts. "Look here, you've got to stop at the best place in town here while I ride out to this Sept Amis."

He was by no means, however, to have everything his own way. The mere suggestion of physical action restored her self-confidence and again retarded her anxiety; the prospect of movement made her want to lead the move and helped her treat the necessity therefore as lightly as might be. She even laughed at Jefford.

"Stop here? I will not!"

And then began their first real quarrel.

"You will!"

"I won't!"

It was childish, this. "Don't you see that you ought to?" he sulkily inquired.

She shook her chestnut hair.

"After all, it's *my* grandfather that's lost."

"And it was your grandfather who told you to stay at Fort-de-France."

"When, and how?"

"In that letter he left at your New York hotel

for you. The very letter you were quoting against me a little while ago."

She drew forth the evidence and unfolded it.

"You would make a poor witness in a court of law, Mr. Jefford. My grandfather knows me too well to 'tell' me—he only 'recommends.'"

Sam wouldn't look at the thing. "Anyhow, I came here as a favor——"

"I know, and I'd love you for it—if you didn't spoil it by giving orders."

He scolded; so did she. He pleaded; she was iron. He pleaded some more, but her pretty stubbornness would not listen to him.

"Of course, I can't make you stay behind," he admitted, "but I can refuse to take you with me."

"Of course, I can't make you take me with you," she granted, "but I can refuse to stay in this town."

"If you won't wait here——" Sam began.

"If you won't take me along with you," she cut in with ultimate resolve, "I'll simply get a horse and ride after you—or, more likely, ahead of you!"

Upon this declaration, a final glance at her determined face proved to him that its purpose was unchangeable. He tried to tell himself that his

fears were groundless—in the end, he had, anyhow, to surrender. Grudgingly he brought her into the yellow glare of the Rue St. Louis.

Instantly they seemed transported to one of those chattering provincial towns that Sam had known while with the A. E. F. in France. Though the houses were vividly painted, though every doorway was protected by green jealousies, here were the same iron balconies, one for every flat, and the same gossip going on from them. Here was the "Grand Café" and its pavement tables, stout madame, her oily black hair piled high, at a desk just inside the door; here was the "Bazar Parisien." He all but forgot his puzzle.

"Look at those soldiers! If they weren't in linen uniforms I'd expect to hear them tell how much worse the first Verdun attack was than anything we fellows caught."

"They could, most likely," said the girl.

"Why," he cried a moment later, "even the good old street signs are blue with white lettering."

"But," she pointed out, "you didn't see barefoot ladies of color in Tours."

It was Sunday. Church crowds filled the thor-

oughfare, women especially, and of every tint—cinnamon and chocolate, black and sepia, fawn-colored skins and skins as yellow as wheat. In a bizarre way, many were beautiful.

"Their clothes," whispered Marcia, "make me feel as if I were walking through a rainbow."

The two Americans turned into the market place where, amid bunches of golden bananas and heaps of strange vegetables of unfamiliar hues, the open stalls displayed fish that wore the colors of the purchasers' dresses. Every shop stood wide.

Well, Sam reflected, he couldn't turn his companion over to the police nor yet lock her up in a hotel room while he made the journey to that queer plantation—wherever it might be. He had to take her with him, since she was determined to go, and, since perforce reconciled to taking her, he made a virtue of the necessity, and found it—as one finds most virtues, once they are achieved—not at all unpleasant. Resolved, nevertheless, to be at least nominal commander, he issued a commissary order.

"In New York we thought about every kind of clothes—at least for me—except the kind we seem

most likely to need. We'd better get what we need right now."

Some such clothes, it appeared, she had bought during her brief Manhattan shopping tour before her fortunate encounter with him, but several articles that he now named she had forgotten. The order was made effective.

While somber nuns marshaled, from church to convent, past the door of one shop, a procession of orphan pupils in purple turbans, the travelers, passing within, secured the kind of garments that were better adapted to their prospective journey by land than those worn for their sea voyage. They changed in brightly curtained compartments on either side of high-heaped wares. Marcia bought sandwiches near by and *brioches,* and Sam, though he scorned to provide weapons for what he argued must be a peaceful journey to a friendly place, made other purchases, including a flash lamp, and a flask of native rum against accidents. The Grand Hotel Bellevue, where they left their suit cases to follow by the more leisurely stage-coach, provided a road map and horses that were at least adequate.

Before noon they were en route. The trade winds made the day far less stifling than that on which they had left New York. They passed behind the weather-worn cathedral at the inclosure surrounding that figure of the Blessed Virgin which, when at St. Pierre, escaped the volcano's violence, and so riding by the neglected Place de la Savane, with its statue of Napoleon's Josephine, they left the town.

The road was good, and the ominous crater of the great Pelée would have alone sufficed to indicate their direction. The horses trotted around the base of one after another of the little island's four hundred mountains, dark from cypresses; through valleys aglow with orchidaceous bloom they went, and beside fields so fertile that they appeared to grow food without aid from the hand of man.

With each new revelation, Marcia's spirits mounted steadily. "I never saw anything so lovely," she declared.

But Sam did not answer. As soon as the town had dropped behind them, his doubts returned, and the nearer they drew to the purple of Pelée

the more there seemed to issue thence some emanation that weighted his heart.

They had crazily set out on they knew not what mission—been pursued for they knew not what cause—and now, in what was potentially the most dangerous stage of the affair so far encountered, Sam had still to bear the responsibility of Marcia's well being. She was a delightful comrade, but she was in his care.

That thief who had escaped from the *St. Basile* in order to avoid any charge which, on the evidence of his vivid necktie, might have been lodged against him with the port police—he had shown himself resourceful and persistent. Something—something which the girl possessed, or which he thought she possessed—he had already risked much to procure. Was it likely that he would quit now? Safely away from the ship he could have slipped along the coast and entered Fort-de-France undetected. Hidden in its Sunday crowds, he might easily have followed the conspicuous Americans. Concealed by this heavy underbrush that hedged all the way, any swift-footed native, acquainted

with highroad-paralleling trails, could be readily and secretly following the travelers even now.

They came into a village that at first view had looked as if it had rolled down the mountain at whose foot it rested. Houses and streets were all of stone of the same sort, the former gray under the tropical blue of the sky, the latter running up and down, twisting and turning between narrow sidewalks like things, once living and in pain, that some sudden death had petrified into immortal immobility.

Negroes, in high-crowned, broad-brimmed, grass-woven hats, shuffled by. Girls, whose hands were on their swaying hips, and on whose heads were baskets heavily laden, smiled sadly and said, *"Bon jou'."* Sam, in some uncertainty of the most direct egress from the tangled way, asked it of the next pedestrian.

She was a bent black woman, hobbling with a cane. She must have been beyond ninety, yet her skirt was yellow and her apron red and the madras —the canary-and-brown striped handkerchief wound around her gray locks—terminated in a projecting end that stood upright from between her brows.

"Where are you going?" she inquired in the syncopated French of the island.

He told her that he and his companion were bound for the *Plantation des Sept Amis.*

Instantly a curious pallor dawned under her dark and wrinkled skin. Her dim eyes rolled and the erect turban end trembled.

"Then you should get there before sunset," she said.

"I want to," said Sam, "but we've got tangled up in these picturesque streets of yours, and what I'm asking now is the quickest way out of them."

The old woman did not answer that. "The road to the *Plantation des Sept Amis* is a good road, and the country is a beautiful country, but there are *zombis* there."

"Of course," said Sam, "I know all that, but——"

"You don't at all," Marcia interrupted, pressing forward. Despite her three years' residence away from home she had the American tourist's thirst for minor information. "What," she persuasively asked of the negress, "are *zombis?*"

The ebon crone looked at the girl and slowly crossed herself. "Madame," she said, "they are

the ghosts of the evil dead that have power over the living." She raised her stick and pointed to an alley on the right. "That will lead you back to the highroad."

"But what——" Marcia began.

The negress shook her strange head and scuttled away. The girl turned to Sam:

"I believe she's afraid to say any more about the what-do-you-call-them, 'ghosts of the evil dead with power over the living!'" Marcia gave a shudder that was not altogether mockery. "It does sound rather dreadful, doesn't it?"

Jefford's response was abrupt.

"In most cases, I'd prefer the evil dead to the evil living that they could have any power over."

She did not ask him what he meant. Together they pressed along the route that their witchlike informant had indicated.

From that moment the scenery grew wilder. A few fields of tobacco and bananas edged the village on its eastern side; but beyond these the travelers entered upon a deserted and tortuous track. It wound among gigantic trees of centuries' growth, around mountainsides; and it wound for some time

steadily upward. There were now no houses to be seen. Silence fell from the peaks and descended on the Americans, and when the road dipped again it ran along the foot of an appalling cliff.

Then at last the resilient Marcia put a question. "What are you thinking of now?" she inquired.

He was thinking that here was a splendid place to be overhauled—splendid for the overhauler. He was thinking, too, that a way so serpentine must indeed have, among the mountains, many a short cut for a native who wanted to overtake a stranger.

CHAPTER X

A SHADOW DISAPPEARS

WHAT Sam, however, said was: "I'm thinking that your grandfather knew what he was about when his letter recommended you to stay in Fort-de-France."

She tried to laugh him down and did not notice how malignly the echoing cliff mocked her laughter.

"Oh, we've decided all about that recommendation!"

"H'm. We have, have we? I thought——"

"Well, I'm thinking," Marcia said, "that we're both hungry. And," she added, "here's the very place for a picnic."

Directly ahead of them the shadows of that mountainous wall of stone retreated some thirty feet, leaving, to the right of the road, a grassy semicircle. A wavering ray of sunlight had edged its way across the ramparts overhead and seemed to be falling in iridescent metal into this green refuge.

A cascade, that leaped from high above, swayed in the late afternoon air and then dropped into a pool so deep as almost to still the water's sound before it ran on in a bubbling, rapid stream. Two flat rocks of volcanic gray were placed, as if for the very purpose of tired travelers' rest, at the rill's rim.

"Do you remember the old Greek story about Danaë," asked the girl, "and how Zeus courted her by turning into a shower of gold? I think he must have looked like this waterfall."

The picture was pretty, and, as he didn't know the legend and possessed that rare gift of a mind humble in regard to subjects unknown to it, he took no exception to her slightly pedagogical manner. "I'm not strong on the classics," he readily admitted; "but that waterfall looks to me like a bridal veil in a breeze."

He had spoken without consideration and the next moment he was blushing to the roots of his brown hair. Yet, if she saw his embarrassment at the nuptial simile, she pretended not to. Hadn't she said that she could love him—if he only wouldn't give orders?

"Now let's cheer up," she said, "and take a quarter of an hour to our sandwiches. Look, I've brought some mangoes, too. Did you ever eat mangoes before? I never did, and I don't know how, but I'm going to learn."

She was already afoot. What could he do but meet her smile, water the horses, tether them where the grass was ripest and sit beside her in this spot contrived for forgetfulness?

They ate as young people can. They ate all the sandwiches and all the *brioches*. She bent above the pool and scooped up water in the slim hands still stained with iodine; he lay beside it and drank deep. They struggled with the mangoes until Sam felt that he was trying to chew a ball of sweet thread, and that most of the ends were turning into tangled dental floss; Marcia laughingly made him present his back while she finished her mango at the pond's rim. Returning, she talked enough of her recent work in the Near East to elicit, from his habitual reticence concerning the war, an anecdote or two of its western front. She was used to having her own generally charming will with things; the quarter hour became a half.

Then suddenly—at least for Sam—something cut through the tapestries of their retreat. Nothing audible or immediately visible; something silent and unseen, but creepingly real. It was the result of that inheritance from our earliest savage ancestors of the wilds, which under the thin polish of modern civilization still warns a man when he is inimically observed.

Jefford had been sitting well away from the cliff, but with his back to it. Now, from somewhere behind him, like a knife striking downward between his shoulders, he felt the gaze of a distant watcher, keen and cold.

He rose quickly.

Had she felt it, too? Yes, she also rose.

"What's the matter?"

All her gayety had fled. She spoke bravely, but in a whisper.

Sam threw back his head and searched the cliff edge high above them. Had he been alone he would have felt no fear; but now he was afraid—afraid for the safety of this already thrice-threatened girl.

"Somehow," he said, "I thought there was somebody up there."

He wished at once that he had not told her. Only the ragged battlements were to be seen, fixed for centuries. He ought not to have told her even had he seen what he expected—and what he expected he scarcely knew.

But Marcia was looking where he looked: "There's no one."

"No one." He noticed with annoyance that his own voice had instinctively lowered.

"Of course not."

"Anyhow," he smiled, "it's just as well we thought so, for we'd better hurry if we're to take our colored friend's advice and make the *Sept Amis* before dark—and you know there's hardly any twilight in these latitudes."

It was again in silence that they rode—now, despite every effort of both their wills, a silence more and more sinister. The purple crest of Mont Pelée drew closer and waxed higher with each conquered mile, and with each mile its influence settled on them more heavily. At their left a roll-

ing country fell away toward the sea, but on their right the towering cliff appeared endless.

Once they reined in abruptly and without a spoken word of agreement. A pebble was falling from the heights. It must have been no larger than an egg, and it struck the road fully fifty yards in advance of them. It was no missile—but what had dislodged it from its long-abiding place?

They smiled at each other and went on, yet Marcia felt that her attempt at unconcern was a pretense detected, and Sam knew that his reassurance failed to reassure. Every few paces each rider would surreptitiously scan the acclivity, and each, without comment, observe the other in the act.

Then they noted ahead a quick turn southward of the road, where it would leave the vast wall behind them. The sun was slipping back of the cliff, and its light showed relief on both their faces.

"I'll certainly be glad to get away from it," said Sam.

"So will I," she said.

"Not that there was any danger, of course," said

Sam, his glance ahead, but raised in spite of his phrase, "only, you know——"

The words died on his lips. Just beyond there, where the road turned, the setting sun had lowered half its angry disk behind the ramparts. It threw them into silhouettes.

And one of the silhouettes moved.

"Did you see that?" Marcia demanded.

Even as she spoke her question, the shadow drew back and disappeared.

There was no use in lying. Oh, if *only* he were alone! Sam nodded.

"We've got to pass below it," said the girl.

"You wait here and I'll——"

"Climb up there?" She indicated the sheer cliff-side. "How? No, we've got to go on; we've got to get to the plantation. But it would be safer to go fast. A loosened rock—a shot from up there——"

Before he could protest she dug her heels into her horse's flanks. The startled animal dashed forward, and Sam urged his mount beside hers and between her and the cliff.

No rock fell. No shot followed them. They turned with the road, but they did not slacken

pace until that threatening wall was a half mile in the rear—until, before them, beyond a few untended gutta-percha fields, stretched the prosperous estate that, their road map told them, must be the *Plantation des Sept Amis.*

Wide acres of sugar cane rose to the southern uplands and southwestward to those foothills that alone separated the estate from the lap of Mont Pelée. The last red rays of sunset washed the scene in crimson. They fell on the low roofs of the far-away workmen's living quarters and touched the low-lying sugar mills; they gilded the front of the distillery, of which the high chimney stood out sharply in its turn against a pale reflection of the afterglow. Here, in the middle distance, each at the center of its special clump of cypresses, scattered pink cottages stood, and straight down from the highway a mile-long avenue of royal palms led directly to the main residence.

"H'm—these Martinique plantation managers don't live so badly," said Jefford.

"It's lovely," admitted the girl, "but I wonder——" And then she fell suddenly silent again.

Unlike the general island dwelling, this one—

dating from an earlier era—was a full three stories and attic high, a broad front with two long wings running backward, the western terminating in a round, half ruined and patently neglected cyclone tower. The rest of the house was obviously well kept. A multitude of little balconies protruded from the yellow-tinted walls, and over large portions of the masonry dark vines clambered to the flat roof.

Sam guessed the completion of his companion's broken sentence, but would not add to her returned anxiety. He strained at gayety.

"The joint does look like two millions," he admitted.

She did her brave best to match his artificial mood. "It is worth a great deal," she said.

"Although a hundred pounds of cane doesn't often give more than seven or eight pounds of sugar, my grandfather says the place is worth a great deal of money."

Yet there was no denying that the sight did not raise their spirits. Throughout the plantation a sense of speciousness prevailed, but also a sense of solitude. The distances from building to building

were long and, though every westward-looking window mirrored the red sunset on that Sunday evening before the determination of its ultimate ownership, the estate might have been deserted pending the morrow's decision. It was as if the place and all upon it lay consciously hidden in this immense valley and, hiding, held breath, while there, across those foothills, smoking Pelée waited and knew that when it cared to speak it would hand down a decision that would render the decisions of all human courts null and void.

"Come on," said Marcia.

With Sam at her side, she put her horse to a canter down the avenue of palms. They drew rein under an arbor and before a flight of pink steps, wide at its foot and narrowing toward its top which led to a broad veranda and a closed front door.

Was this vast dwelling empty? Jefford again heavily attempted to lighten their sense of the ominous. "Nobody home."

"Madame, m'sieu'!"

There was somebody home—somebody that spoke in a startled voice and that slurred his Rs as do the Martinique blacks.

He was Caucasian; evidently at some warning of their noisy approach he had come out of the house and concealed himself behind the trunk of the last royal palm until sure of their peaceful intentions. Now he was issuing awkwardly into full view. A small man, clad in stiff white linen, a man with a huge head covered by curly hair that somehow did not seem native to it, the face sun-puckered, a nose that was a lump, and, behind a steel-rimmed pince-nez, eyes deeper set than any that either of the Americans had ever seen.

Not even Marcia's so far retained self-possession had been unable to repress a start at the apparition. Its brow was heavily lined, the expression in some sense the expression of a scholar, yet about it hung an air of only half concealed aptitude for material things that provided a disquieting contrast.

"Good evening," said Sam. He took an instant dislike to the man and noted under his vague smile a betraying nervousness. Nervousness in a man always excited Sam's suspicions.

"Madame——" The odd person looked now only at Marcia.

"Mademoiselle," she corrected. She spoke a bet-

ter French than that of their scarcely effusive host. "Me, I am Marcia Maynard, monsieur," she announced, "the granddaughter of one of the owners of this plantation, Monsieur Benjamin Franklin Maynard——"

The white hands of the man she addressed had met before him. Sam saw the fingers lock and open and lock again. There was something on this fellow's mind.

"But yes, mademoiselle. And permit me: I am Joseph Monnier, general counsel and manager in succession to my father, of this *Plantation des Sept Amis.* It is I who, when the representative of the Banque Martinique arrives to-morrow, am of course designated to make the disposition of the estate." He had spoken rapidly and with a certain provincial pride; now he hesitated and, looking toward Sam, smiled in a satirical way that set Jefford's cheeks aflame. "That is all regular. But this gentleman is scarcely M'sieu' Benjamin Maynard."

Marcia, when she glanced at Sam's youthfully sullen and somewhat ingenuous face, which should have been entirely disarming, said:

"Of course not! He is my friend, Monsieur Jef-

ford, who has accompanied me here, as my grandfather wished."

"Exactly! But the money must be paid only to survivors of the original Seven."

She regarded the diminutive man in undisguised amazement.

"Monsieur Jefford has not come for any money. Monsieur Maynard merely told me to bring him."

"But, I still do not comprehend, mademoiselle." The little lawyer with a lion's head was pulling at his curly gray hair. The hair marvelously moved *en masse,* and both of his auditors realized that he wore a wig. "I do not comprehend——"

Was the creature's distraction genuine or simulated? Sam could not determine, but Marcia was resolved to. She stamped an impatient foot.

"Monsieur," she said—for he who called himself Monnier had now backed to the steps and seemed to be blocking their entrance—"will you kindly let me pass? I wish to see my grandfather at once."

Thereat the blow fell:

"But, mademoiselle, he is not here."

Sam stepped forward. Marcia involuntarily drew away.

"Not here? Then where the devil is he?" Sam demanded.

The lawyer blinked at them out of the recesses of his deep-set eyes. Both of his hands were now occupied with his wig; they had twisted it from front to side and completely transformed, to the evilly grotesque, the expression of his seamy face.

"Where is M'sieu' Maynard indeed?" Monsieur Monnier looked from one of the pair to the other. "I can but presume he is no longer a claimant, for very certainly he has not arrived here."

CHAPTER XI

"A GOOD DEAL OF SICKNESS"

THIS time Marcia's face went wholly white. For a scant moment her eyelids drooped and fluttered. She did not sway, but Jefford expected that she would. With his thoughts involuntarily more for her than for that missing man whom he had never seen, he stepped toward the girl. Nevertheless, she recovered herself before any protection could be offered, and it was she who spoke first.

"My grandfather," she said steadily, "cabled me from Fort-de-France just a week ago and gave me to understand that he was here."

The lawyer's half-buried eyes blinked at her.

"Mademoiselle has had a shock——"

"I know what I am saying."

"You are well sure of the message? And its date?"

"Absolutely."

"Of course she is!" said Sam.

The queer inquisitor made a rapid gesture of annoyance at this interpolation by some one whom he clearly chose to regard as legally outside of the question.

"I mean," he pursued to Marcia, "are you well sure of the authenticity of that message?"

Her eyes widened. "Why would anybody——"

Again that gesture of annoyance—on this occasion directed against her.

"May I," the *avocat* extended one white hand, "may I be permitted to see the message, mademoiselle?"

Marcia's bead bag still held it, and the bead bag now hung from the belt of her riding skirt. Before her questing fingers reached it Sam interposed.

"Our copy was lost, but the original must be on file at the Fort-de-France cable office."

His glance successfully met the girl's. She understood and half nodded.

At that Monsieur shrugged, but seemed temporarily satisfied. Though he mumbled something about "carelessness," he readjusted his wig and his manner with it. He became a perfect, if grave, host. He called servants; he gave orders.

"Your assumption of M'sieu' Maynard's presence here," he apologized, "for a moment quite upset me. Will you not come in? Martinique is not America of the North; there is little can be done of a Sunday evening, and you cannot return to Fort-de-France tonight. But you can dine and rest here, and we can talk things over—talk things over."

Bewilderingly, he bowed them through a wide, cool hall and thence to a long living room. It was full of old rosewood furniture, and in one corner ticked a solemn, big-bellied Breton clock.

"Excuse me for a little minute," he concluded. "I shall myself see that your rooms are prepared."

He was gone. Marcia, from long habit, had been consulting the clock. She was comparing it with her professional wrist watch and aimlessly noted that the two timepieces corresponded exactly; but she turned as soon as the door closed behind the departing lawyer.

"What does it mean?"

Sam shook his head. "I don't know; I can't guess. H'm. He's nervous, and a nervous—— Besides, I never did like a man that wore a wig—he always has something more to hide than baldness."

"Grandpa *must* have come here."

"Unless this Monnier's given us one hint of the truth—unless that cable *was* a trick."

"But why should it be?"

Jefford had rolled a cigarette. He lit it. "That's the king among all these puzzles that we've got to solve here. This shyster's right about one matter—we have to stay the night here. Well, we must make some use of it. The only trouble is, I'm afraid of what might happen to you meantime."

"Oh," said Marcia almost irritably, "don't worry about me!"

In a voice of excessive age, the old clock in the corner announced the hour of six, and on its first stroke Monsieur Monnier returned.

"As you are strangers to our island," he explained, smiling sourly and wagging his great head, "I have given you rooms close together, so that each may feel a compatriot is not far away. But to accomplish this I have had to put you in the farther wing, which is as little used as the cyclone tower at the end of it—you have without doubt observed our old cyclone tower, *hein?* The readiest entrance is through the garden."

He led them into the beginning of the long tropical night. Clouds scurried overhead, for the wind was rising in sporadic gusts, but a dull glow hung above Mont Pelée, and by it they could see that they were passing through a tangle of brilliant flowers which seemed as much awake as by day.

"Monsieur Monnier," said the girl, "I wish you would tell me when you last heard from my grandfather."

The *avocat* put a lean hand to his head. "Let me think—let me—— It is a long while since, that is well sure. A merely formal note about some detail or other."

"But didn't he write to you to say that he was coming to claim his share of this property?"

"No—no, of that I am certain. Why should he? His presence to-morrow would be sufficient to his interests, his absence insurmountable. No. You must have seen him, mademoiselle, many times since that I have had any letter from him."

She said: "I have been in Europe for three years."

Immediately she wished that she had not given that information. Sam was plucking at her sleeve

remonstratingly, but their guide appeared not to have heard it. He pointed ahead of them where there revealed itself a kitchen garden that gave every evidence of a fond attention.

"Do not judge my poor food patch to-day," the little lawyer cautioned as they turned a hedge of giant hibiscus. "If you could but be here six weeks hence—gales permitting—I must have a period of quiet weather; but there"—now it was to his cheek that he touched his hand—"luck is against me, it is the wind from the south!" He opened a door in the wall that rose suddenly before them. A maid stood behind it. "We shall dine in half an hour."

The servant, a mulatto in linen petticoat and bodice, with a kerchief of red silk about her shoulders, carried two lamps and showed the guests to adjoining rooms on the second story. Sam, on being conducted into his, surveyed it as he might have studied a newly occupied trench in an active sector.

It was huge and cool, with a canopied four-poster bed, an antique washstand and a huge fireplace wherein, against the rainy season, had months ago been piled a heap of dried sugar cane, which, after

the last vestige of juice has been extracted, is Martinique's favorite fuel. What, however, most interested Jefford were the walls; they were at least a meter in thickness, either to shut out the heat or to withstand the earthquakes, and the three windows were like windows in a fort.

The maid was just leaving when he faced her.

"Can the *zombis* climb up here?" he asked.

Quickly the mulatto crossed herself. "M'sieu' does ill to speak of them. No good comes of their mention."

What meant all this dread of the *zombis,* any*how?* "H'm. Do you believe they might try the climb?" he still smilingly inquired.

Her voice trembled. "Until a little while ago, we thought they left the Black Swamp where they dwell only to prowl along the cliffs, but lately—lately there have been strange things——"

"What sort of things?"

"Oh, m'sieu', it is not possible—it is too dangerous——"

And at that word she fled.

He had to postpone his researches into the occult and begin the after all more pressing affair of ablu-

tion. Nevertheless, his toilet was necessarily of the briefest, and the always practical and now gravely disturbed Marcia lingered in her room no longer than did he in his. Indeed, her door opened as he stepped into the stone-flagged hall.

"What shall we do?" she began. "Sam, what——"

His heart leaped at her unconscious use of that name, but there was opportunity for confidence of no sort whatever. Upon the sound of their voices the maid rose out of the shadows. In her rôle of conductress, she remained with them until she had delivered them into the candle-lit, paneled dining room behind the salon of the Breton clock; and here Monsieur Monnier lowered his hands from his curly wig to welcome them.

"It goes? It goes well, I trust?" He waved them to the seats appointed. He was sympathetic; his tone held a nice balance between the gravity of a friendly acquaintance and the cordiality of a host; but he now either believed or pretended to believe that they had made some silly mistake in missing Monsieur Maynard at Fort-de-France, and he em-

ployed his authority as nominal master of the house to postpone all discussion until his feast was over.

"We have a proverb in Martinique: 'With coffee comes wisdom.' It will be so to-night, for I have asked a wiser head than mine to share our coffee and therewith assist us with advice."

He gestured to the well-appointed table. There was nothing for them to do but to pretend to eat.

It was an excellent meal, had they had the hearts to enjoy it. Over the diners' shoulders a sad-eyed octoroon waitress, wearing the trailing one-piece *douillette* and heavy bracelets and a necklace of gold beads, handed, course by course, such a dinner as Sam had never seen served since the night of his sole experience at Foyot's, in the Paris of November, 1918. He could make, however, no better pretense than the girl opposite him, and, had it not been for the constant chatter of the lawyer, the meal would even have been a very silent one.

Still, Monsieur Monnier was talker enough for all three. If he would not speak of the mystery of Benjamin Franklin Maynard, he spoke at endless length about that compact to which Marcia's grandfather was a party. Indeed he seemed to have no other

topic, so garrulous was he upon this one. The lawyer-manager had given twenty years of his life to it—since the death of his father in what, speaking of the destruction of St. Pierre, he well called "the grand calamity"—and so the Americans' tontine seemed to him, while nothing odd, yet supremely interesting.

"Two long decades of service," Sam heard him reflecting, "and yet"—his deep eyes blinked behind their pince-nez—"it is only within the last few days that I have met those of my principals who will—who seem most likely to inherit."

"Then some of the seven are here?" asked Jefford quickly.

"But yes, but yes." Monsieur Monnier straightened his recalcitrant wig. "There is Monsieur Mark Opie——"

"He was a great friend of my grandfather," Marcia interrupted. "He can tell us——"

"Unfortunately," the lawyer wagged his great head, "unfortunately to-night he can tell you nothing. He is saving, naturally, all his strength for to-morrow. Of course he is old. *Malheureusment,* we none of us grow younger. Even you now young

people will some day discover that. Besides M'sieu' Mark Opie is ill."

Sam sat up. "What's the matter with him?"

"He has——" The little host paused before concluding: "He has contracted typhoid fever. It is very prevalent in the islands."

"Then he has been here long?" asked the girl.

"Ah—longer than any of the others. I do not at the moment recollect precisely how long—but, yes, certainly longer than any of the others. And I advised him to boil the water. This water," said Monsieur Monnier, delicately desecrating a glass of aged Burgundy by a few drops from his tumbler, "has been boiled for twenty minutes—oh, of an exactness. You need have no fear of it. I give orders very strict; then personally I watch them obeyed. Yes, and then besides poor M'sieu' Mark Opie, there is Theodore Ripley with his two gallant sons——"

Marcia ventured the impropriety of speaking to Sam in English: "I remember now that grandpa never quite trusted him since they were down here the first time together."

"He, too, is old, of course," their host calmly continued, "but, ah, of what a vigor! After every meal, even after dinner and in this climate, he walks alone

for miles about the plantation. Yes—and finally there is the only other survivor, excepting of course mademoiselle's grandfather, there is unfortunate M'sieu' Buckner."

Monsieur Monnier's voice grew sad again. Sam looked up sharply.

"What about him?"

"*Helas,* there is the chance that poor M'sieu' Buckner will be too weak even to be carried downstairs to our conference to-morrow—and you understand that every claimant must be personally present. To have lived so long, to have come at last so far, and then to fail——" The lawyer moved his wig to a mournful angle. "It is terrible!"

The coffee was being served; from somewhere there came the sound of music. Sam deliberately rolled a cigarette. Leaning forward he tried to catch and hold those cavernous eyes.

"There seems to be a lot of sickness on this plantation, monsieur. H'm. Your Monsieur Ripley is the only well man of these three, eh? And Monsieur Maynard is missing. Just what other trifle is it besides senile decay, of course, and probably the prevalent typhoid—just what other trifle is it that ails Monsieur Buckner?"

CHAPTER XII

WHAT THE POLICE SAID

THE shot struck—though exactly what it struck neither he that fired nor she that watched could then determine.

There came an uncanny pause. It lay not only on the talk; it weighted the very lungs of the three diners.

As a violin at one end of a hall, sounding the occult keynote of a wine glass at the other, will set that crystal into agonized and involuntary response, so, sometimes, an apparently random word—or just as certainly a mere tone—from the lips of one human being may seem to inherit the heartbeats of a listener whose hidden hopes or fears have been similarly touched, and so his neighbor, instinctively guessing the vague truth, shares his purely physical alarm in the unreasoned revolt of flesh against ruthless revelation of secrets guarded by like flesh, however much that neighbor's mind demands exposure.

Still more acute the crisis when the evoking word has been premeditated, the attack deliberate.

Thus it is for the actor stumbling over his lines, the theretofore impartial audience, the hostile critic in the stalls. Thus the accused witness trapped in cross-examination, the courtroom spectators, even that triumphing district attorney who has carefully set the trap. And thus, finally, Monsieur Monnier, Marcia, Sam himself in that paneled and candle-lit dining room of the *Sept Amis* plantation under the sinister shadow of Mont Pelée.

For Jefford had indeed caught his host's cavernous eyes—and with something that he was immediately helpless to classify. The islander's jaw fell; he gulped in his skinny throat; his sense of the near approach of betrayal was pitifully evident. Was it some festering suspicion that he harbored, or did he guard some evil knowledge?

Marcia, anxious as she was to end her perplexities, experienced the impulse to intervene with mere chatter, but could find no smallest word. Sam, keen as were now his hunter's urgings, admitted that flash of compassion which comes to every good

hunter when he looks into the clouded soul of his stricken prey.

The octoroon servant in the *douillette* stood poised behind her master's chair, the silver of the antique coffeepot gleaming from her tawny grasp. Through the wall of the living room pierced the ticking of the Breton clock, regular, emotionless. From somewhere outside came that music heard a moment since, the music as of a tiny organ over which light fingers brushed, producing the very air whereto French children sing their favorite nursery rhyme:

Au clair de la lune,
Mon ami Pierrot,
Donne moi ta plume
Pour ecrire un mot;
Ma chandelle est morte——

Sam had his duty to do. He shook pity from him. "Well?" he demanded.

Then:

J'ai n'plus de feu——

the faint organ outside went on with the second stanza of its infantile song:

Ouvre moi ta porte
Pour l'amour de Dieu!

It was drawing nearer. As if its coming brought courage, or increased the necessity for self-control, Monsieur Monnier violently got himself in hand. He blinked hard; he readjusted his wig—unnecessarily.

"What is the matter with M'sieu' Buckner?" he repeated, as if to gain time. Whereas he had lacked words a second since, they came now as rapidly as during the early courses of the dinner—but now they came nervously. "*Helas,* you may well inquire, m'sieu'. What beside that—how call you it?—senile decay? But nothing beside it! What more would you? Have I not said, a while since, we do not grow younger? This which afflicts M'sieu' Buckner is indeed the sole ill that no man can escape if he lives enough long time—age, m'sieu'."

"H'm," said Sam.

Marcia said nothing.

"Only age," pursued Monsieur Monnier. "M'sieu'

Buckner collapsed before landing. Our doctor of the plantation had to have him carried from the ship. He is housed in this very dwelling, but, since arriving here on a litter, he has been confined to his room. The nights he supports without aid, but at the first warmth of the sun he collapses and survives the day only through stimulants."

"*Ma chandelle est morte*——"

It was almost as if that repeating instrument could, and did, sing the words.

Sam looked at Marcia. She sat opposite with tense lips. The music was very close now, and the sound of the old song came like a tonic wind to this great house's atmosphere of suspense and suspicion.

"M'sieu' *le medecin,*" announced a black boy at the dining-room door.

The lawyer rose, wiping his thin lips with his napkin.

"He is to come directly here. This is our adviser, my friends; this——"

The servant ushered in a tall man of perhaps thirty-six, with merry eyes and the bearing of sound health. His curling black beard did not conceal a cheerfully smiling mouth, and his gaze was

clear and steady. It was he who had been the musician, and his instrument, still held in one hand, was a common mouth organ.

"Mademoiselle Maynard—M'sieu' Jefford—permit me—our physician of the plantation of whom I spoke but now—long a resident of our sister island Guadeloupe, but a native of our own Martinique—Doctor Deschamps."

The newcomer bent over Marcia's hand, but not too low or too long to annoy Sam. "I am desolated to be so late, yet it was necessary to compose my patient for the night."

Although not generally drawn to musicians, Jefford decided that he liked this invigorating Doctor Deschamps.

"You mean Mr. Opie?" asked Marcia.

"Pooh! Pooh!" The medical man dismissed Opie's case. "He has had but a touch of fever; it is nothing. We shall carry him without difficulty to the so-momentous conference of the morning. I speak of that poor fellow, M'sieu' Buckner. Him I had to attend in this house, and thereafter there was a slight case of nerves at the dwelling of one of the factory hands."

Doctor Deschamps sat down beside Sam and drank at a gulp the still burning-hot coffee that the gold-necklaced maid placed before him. Monsieur Monnier, with bowed head and wig once more askew, was rolling bread pills intently.

"And yet," said he in a voice that did not succeed in being matter of fact, "M'sieu' Opie sent for me this afternoon."

Deschamps raised his thick eyebrows:

"Yes?"

"Yes."

"And you went?"

"But naturally."

"It probably was tonic, that," smiled the physician.

"He wanted me," Monsieur Monnier, as if with some difficulty—or reluctance—explained, "in my professional capacity. I was with him for an hour."

Deschamps laughed outright.

"But that is no sign of weakness—to see you for an hour."

"I thought it best to tell you," said Monnier, still intent on his bread pills, "so that there could be—

because you might think that his state of mind was symptomatic. He had me draw his will."

The doctor scrutinized his host. Sam could see only Deschamps' profile, but he read doubt there. It was as if this medical man shared the American's suspicions. Marcia saw it, too, and half rose. Then, with a little sigh through his beard Deschamps settled back in his seat. He made a gesture that disposed of this subject and took up another.

"I received your note, M'sieu' Monnier," he said. "You state with legal clarity the strange position of your guests, but you have overlooked the most obvious course for them, which I should have believed a man of the law would be the first to remember."

Monnier's fingers went to his false hair. "Yes, m'sieu'?"

"From the steamship lists and hotel registers, the police keep a record of every visitor landing on our little island. The thing to be done is to telephone the police of Fort-de-France."

Sam was on his feet instantly.

"Telephone? I didn't know there was such a thing in Martinique. There were no wires along the road."

"They run beside the coast," Monsieur Monnier let fall, as if to himself.

"Of course the doctor is right. If I'd known you had a phone," said Sam, with all of a good American's devotion to things rapid and mechanical, "I'd have used it long ago. Where do you keep your phone in this house?"

The wizened *avocat* reluctantly sighed. Immensely relieved to have something to do, Jefford strode out of the room. Among the trio that he left around the table behind him, nobody for a long time spoke.

Then Marcia broke the tension. "If there is no news——"

"Oh," said the doctor comfortingly, "I think well that there will be news. Of a certainty, there must be."

"If there is none," Marcia persisted, "or none that makes it necessary for me to—to do something else, I shall at once go and see my grandfather's old friend, Mr. Opie. If only as a nurse, I ought to do that, anyhow, and I can't stay here overnight and be idle."

Deschamps looked at her with the eyes of the

doctor who searches for signs of a nervous breakdown. Monsieur Monnier looked down at his bread pills.

"But M'sieu' Opie is progressing splendidly," the physician attempted to soothe her, "splendidly. And you look—your pardon, mademoiselle, but I speak out of a knowledge of these matters—you look—let us say wearied from your journey. Moreover, the patient already has a nurse."

She looked more than wearied, but she was not the woman to admit either fatigue or weakness. "But I am a trained nurse," Marcia argued.

Then for the first time since Sam had gone out, Monsieur Monnier spoke.

"The news," he murmured, without raising his sunken eyes from those pellets of bread, "will not be encouraging. Wishing not to spoil your dinner I refrained from telling you sooner, and later M'sieu' Jefford was too precipitate for me—but, at once after your arrival, mademoiselle, I took the obvious precaution which our so practical doctor later suggested. Also, I communicated with the cable office."

"What——" asked Marcia. Under the table, in

her lap, she clenched her hands. "What did they say?"

"That that cable message intended for you in New York was handed in on Martinique by what I believe you Americans of the North call a 'tramp,' who made no pretense of being its author."

"But the—the police?"

"The police," began Monsieur Monnier, "said that——"

The door burst open. Standing there, his cheeks flushed, his hazel eyes agleam, Sam finished the sentence:

"They say there is no record of any B. F. Maynard coming to these islands since your grandfather's visit of twenty years ago."

CHAPTER XIII

TYPHOID?

ALMOST by force, they tore themselves out of the house, Marcia and Sam as her guardian, within five minutes of the receipt of that news. Jefford had done all that he could at the moment—which amounted to no more than securing the languid promise of the police of the capital to "investigate." There was no returning to Fort-de-France before morning, and the girl reiterated her inability to remain inactive that night. Deschamps had to take a final look at the more seriously ill of his patients; the lawyer must bestow a final touch on his legal papers before the momentous interview set for nine o'clock of the next morning—he gave them, apologetically, his negro door boy for a guide to that cottage where, it appeared, old Mark Opie lay convalescing.

"It may be mere chance," Marcia said as she walked away beside Sam, "I suppose it is chance—

but have you noticed that Monsieur Monnier has never once let us be alone in each other's company since we had that moment in the salon?"

"H'm," said Jefford, and indicated the nimble black lad scampering close ahead of them like a King Charles spaniel for a walk with his master. "Be careful."

"Surely," the girl protested, "he doesn't understand English."

"H'm," said Sam again.

The wind, always increasing, drove heavy clouds before it. Now they were enveloped in darkness, except for that glow from the slumbering volcano; suddenly the moon would toil from behind its flapping curtains and bathe the plantation in a silver brightness.

Like every human being in face of a puzzle that words cannot solve, Marcia felt the strong urge to talk of the mystery that surrounded her. "Surely," she insisted as they hurried in, "surely you don't suppose this boy understands English."

"He belongs to Monnier," said Sam, "and that lawyer is too nervous for me to trust."

The wind continued to rise. Tall, bare-stemmed

palm trees bowed nearly to the ground; banana plants and sugar cane rustled like dried autumn leaves. The whole landscape seemed to be moving, and even a light in the upper story off a balcony at the northwest corner of the great house appeared to ascend and fall to the rhythm of the elements. Marcia's skirts flapped angrily about her knees, and she took Sam's hand.

They threaded a path through the yard of a dark and silent factory filled with big iron punts that could carry thirty tons of sugar each from field to factory. They circled an inclosure in which gaunt black pigs ran about squealing from fear of the wind. They entered at last a clump of cypresses surrounding a white cottage, ivy hung. A dim light shone through the swaying jalousies, and a still fainter glow crept out of a pair of open windows upstairs.

"Here is the house," their guide informed them.

Before they could so much as thank, much less tip him, he had turned. The wind stopped all sound of the sharp patter of his bare feet on the hard path; the Americans saw him disappear as if the night were a mouth that swallowed him.

"H'm," said Sam, "Monnier seems to have left us alone at last."

He looked downward. Marcia, as if only now realizing that she had held it, released his hand.

"Y-yes," she rather faintly admitted; then added resolutely, "Come on."

That was no invitation; it was a reminder of duty. She took one step forward, but stopped when a dismal sound met her. Sam, on his part, would have preferred to linger, but first her manner reminded him that the circumstances forbade dalliance and then that noise commanded action. It was a low, guttural rumbling—the rumbling of impeded breath in the throat of some living thing. Without a word passed between them, Marcia and Jefford both thought that somebody might be strangling close by.

"It's from inside!" whispered Sam and pointed toward the cottage. "Stand back!"

Of course she would not obey him, but he pressed forward. Stepping quickly in front of her—for he feared for her he knew not what—he shouldered his way between the wind-tossed jalousies and so, Marcia following behind him even closer than he guessed, ran lightly into the cottage.

A brief hallway lay there; a table with a flickering lamp stood a few paces ahead. Beside it, in an armchair of vast proportions, a negro sat, his head thrown back, his mouth open and snore after snore setting the echoes aquiver.

Having entered here prepared to do battle, Jefford hesitated before that sprawling form as if tempted to pummel it, helpless though it was. He emitted a disgusted grunt almost rivaling the snores.

"So that," he muttered, "was what got our goat."

"*That,*" said Marcia, "seems to be what they call a nurse in these islands."

"Some nurse," said Sam. His unwilling thoughts reverted to the ill man. "I always thought a fellow's only chance with typhoid was a question of nursing."

"This case is convalescing. Still, they ought to do better for Mr. Opie than that. But it's just like the tropics."

Jefford put out a hand to shake the negro back to life.

"No, no," said the girl. "Let him be. Here's our chance. I'd rather see the patient alone. Mr. Opie *may* know something of grandpa. As you said just

now, we're somewhere without a Martinique audience at last."

She mounted the near-by stairs, Sam following. The first door that they reached stood open, and they went inside. There at least was something that was no laughing matter.

It was the usual cottage room of the islands, but a night-lamp stood on the bed table and struggled for life amid a heavy atmosphere of fever. In a high four-poster like that in Jefford's room at the residence, lay a large man whose mass of white hair was settled with a certain dignity on the pillow. His gray eyes, evidently once faded, but now abnormally bright, roved in their sockets. They turned in the visitors' direction, yet gave no other sign that they saw these intruders, the rustle of whose entrance had attracted them. The old man's long upper lip trembled as if delirious speech might not be far away.

"Looks awful sick to me," whispered Sam.

Marcia nodded and went up to him. Her cool fingers smoothed back his white hair.

At once the mouth found mumbled words:

"Far to come and long to go! Far to come—and long to go!"

The patient tried to rise, but his new nurse gently restrained him. He looked at her without sight. He called on the name of some woman, doubtless dust this many a year, and fell back on his pillow.

A Biblical-looking stone jug such as Rebecca must have carried to the well plainly acted as a water cooler. Boiled or unboiled, its contents could not hurt this patient now. Marcia poured some fresh water from the container into an empty glass and raised that to the dry mouth.

"There, take just a little," she quietly ordered.

Watching, Sam saw the sick man obey her, his skinny, parched throat working painfully yet greedily. Intelligence began to struggle to his eyes; gratitude came with it. The face softened and a hollow voice inquired:

"Did the doctor—send—send you to be—a new nurse?"

"No, but I'm going to stay a while and take good care of you."

"That's right. Thank you." Large hands plucked at the sheet. "That's right—don't go away."

No fit moment now to prick this sick brain with queries of a vanished friend. "I'll be here all night," she said.

"And that?" The patient stared toward Sam.

"You mustn't bother."

Mark Opie displayed, however, more than the persistent curiosity of an ill man. He showed a dread of strangers that was beyond the querulousness of an invalid.

"I want to know."

"It's a friend."

"A friend?"

"Of mine."

"But I don't want any strangers here—that is, except——"

The invalid was shaking as if with an ague. A half-made excitement blazed from his face and turned his feeble eyes to live coals. Marcia's hospital training told her that this must be quieted at any price. She said the first words that came into her mind calculated to stop this nervous crisis.

"It is my fiancé."

Sam took a step forward. Blushing furiously, Marcia waved him back.

"It was the shortest explanation I could think of," she declared in a whisper.

It seemed, certainly, to satisfy the patient. He sighed and closed thick lids, but presently his eyes were again open and again vacant.

"Oh, dear—oh, dear!" he sighed. There came into his aged face a look of pathetic puzzlement, poignantly like that of a child who confronts his first hard sum at school. "Far to come and long to go," he repeated. "First far to come—and now so far to go."

Marcia produced from that remarkable bead bag the never-absent clinical thermometer which is the badge of her profession.

"Don't talk," she said. "Try not to talk." And she slipped the instrument under his tongue.

Sam drew her aside.

"Marcia?"

"Yes?" Her clear blue eyes met him frankly.

"You said—you called me——"

She bowed toward the sick man. "Can you talk about *that* now?"

It was on his lips to point out that the topic had been, at least for a moment, her own choice; but

something in her gaze shamed him. Women, even nurses, can never regard illness or wounds quite as a soldier does. Sam let her return to a smoothing of the sheets with skilled fingers and to an alteration of the carelessly placed lamp, so that its flame would no longer hurt the sufferer's tired eyes.

To hide his embarrassment, Jefford walked to one of the open windows and looked up at the heavens. There were no screens, and mosquitoes and beetles buzzed in and out at leisure.

"Wind's down again," he cheerfully announced. "It's some changeable climate here. Maybe that's what volcanoes do to a place. I dunno; but for some reason the sky's all stars again and there's the full moon climbing high."

"Sh-h!' said Marcia. She had removed the thermometer. She beckoned Sam, who tiptoed to her side. "A hundred and four," she whispered.

"Isn't that pretty high?"

Her face alone would have been sufficient answer —it was very grave—but she said: "It is more than pretty high for a man who was 'doing splendid,' only a little while ago. Of course, he made his will this afternoon. That was what Monsieur Mon-

nier meant by saying he was sent for in his professional capacity. The excitement of it all must have begun to tell after it was over."

"Deschamps' opinion was——"

"Yes, the doctor seemed to think he was sure to recover, but he must have been neglected by that wretched apology for a nurse. I suppose I have a feeling about such things, but I don't like the look of him."

Jefford gave vent to a sudden burst of impatience: "And I don't like the looks of anything about this whole outfit—except you," he said. He respected their relation to each other and he was profoundly sorry for the patient, yet that single addition he couldn't resist. "The doctor leaves his man on the road to recovery. Then Monnier calls and we find Opie in this condition."

Perhaps it was the mention of his name that again roused the patient. Just then, at all events, they realized that his thoroughly conscious gaze was on them. He spoke.

"Who are you?" he asked of Marcia in that hollow voice of his. It was clear that his physical condition was precarious, but it was also clear that, at

least for this precious minute, his mind was unimpaired. The girl caught her breath. She was torn between her duty as a nurse and her anxiety for her missing relative.

"I'm Marcia Maynard. I'm here"—she would go so far—"because of my grandfather, Benjamin Maynard."

Opie nodded his intelligence.

"You've been here quite a while, haven't you, Mr. Opie?" asked Sam.

"Two weeks, I think—I think so, but time is queer when you're sick. I know I was the first to arrive."

Passing easily through the now stilled air a ripple of voices from outside the house caught Sam's alert attention. Even at this juncture, something drew him toward them; he returned to the window.

To Opie, Marcia, with a perplexed frown, was most unprofessionally, and yet most sagely, saying: "What I don't understand is how you got typhoid in so short a time."

She saw that he was wetting his lips with his thick tongue. Quickly she gave him another sip of water.

"The doctor promised to have me taken to the meeting on a stretcher," he said, "only"—and his eyes narrowed—"I'll never get there."

"Don't say that. You're going to be all right." Marcia patted his arm, but her averted eyes were not so reassuring as she tried to make her voice.

Sam, across the room, was cautiously peeping around the window's edge. The moon was high, the stars were countless and brilliant; it was now the moon of the tropical night. Only a dozen paces from the house, where they might keep watch on the door, stood, clearly defined, the figures of two men—and one of them, Jefford, to his astonishment, recognized.

The other was a dapper young fellow, quite evidently an American. He was engaged in brief and excited conversation with a ratlike, small, eager figure, whose face was grayer than ever in the night light and whose cast eye, raised directly toward his companion and therefore not looking toward the house, was gruesomely clear—the purse snatcher of Fifth Avenue, the would-be thief of the *St. Basile!*

Jefford glanced toward Marcia. She was engrossed with her patient, and to him any explana-

tion would certainly be dangerous. Sam slipped a leg over the sill and began to lower himself softly to the ground.

Marcia observed him in the act and he nodded reassuringly to her. She controlled her curiosity and turned to Opie.

She was alone now with this man—and suddenly she knew that she had never been so much alone in all her life. Some new turn of the night's strange events had called Sam away. She could not guess what it was, but she felt sure that nothing save a pressing danger would be efficacious, and, for the first time, she realized how heavily she had, in the past few days, come to rely on him. A nurse used to scenes of suffering, a woman who had always prided herself on her self-reliance, she understood now that, all unguessing, something—some power beyond her will—had shifted reliance from her shoulders to this hazel-eyed acquaintance's.

Her training fell from her like a discarded garment. Loneliness rushed upon her—loneliness and the increased sense of peril. Ill though her patient was, she *must* question him further.

"You see," she said to the gaunt figure on the bed,

and she put a smooth hand on the gnarled back of one of his, "I am so anxious. Grandpa—Mr. Maynard, you know—cabled me from Fort-de-France as if—as if he were in trouble. He told me to come here at once—and now I can't find him."

Opie was very weak. He might be near his end and yet he still regarded her with an appearance of complete comprehension.

"You do understand me, don't you?" she asked. She was sure now that nothing she might say would have weight in the scales of his destiny. Her big blue eyes were full of trouble.

His own eyes reassured her.

"Well, now," she went on, "it appears that nobody has seen him—my grandfather—not Monsieur Monnier, the lawyer and agent here, or Doctor Deschamps—not any one—and to-night we telephoned the police, and they say he hasn't been in Martinique for twenty years."

To the figure on the bed, she might as well have administered a galvanic shock. He jerked upright. His upper lip lengthened; he stared. An expression of mingled rage and—yes, it was fear!—leaped into his face.

"They—somebody is mistaken!" cried his hollow voice. "And somebody lies! Your grandfather—has been—in this very room."

Was it delirium returned?

"Yes—yes?" she urged.

With an effort more than human he fixed his fevered gaze on the girl.

"Here—in this room—talking," he gasped, "to me. He—he—he——"

The old man's mouth worked on empty sounds. The balance of his fate tipped. It descended—to the sinister side. Suddenly, he called out, in a loud tone, the name of his Maker and fell back upon the pillow.

CHAPTER XIV

AN ACCIDENT

EX-LIEUTENANT JEFFORD, as it is to be hoped you have already observed, was like most men of his years in one respect, and like few men of any age in another matter: he had a somewhat unstable character when in the presence of a particular lady; but, when out of that presence and free to act entirely upon his own initiative, he proved himself always a person of sudden decisions, who was yet generally cautious in his enforcement of them. This peculiar combination of qualities was never more evident than during the latter half of that tumultuous night at the *Sept Amis* plantation. Having made sure that the preoccupied persons outside the cottage had failed to note his rapid and stealthy descent from Mark Opie's death-chamber, Sam waited no longer than the flicker of an eyelid before determining what next to do; then he chose

carefully the best means and the most propitious moment for the doing of it.

To an observation trained for such reconnaissance upon ticklish portions of the World War's western front, certain facts had been immediately clear.

It was evident that this pair of men he observed from the sick-room window had met out here but a moment before he caught sight of them, and that, if either or both of them, had come to spy on or attack Marcia or himself, such purpose was forgotten by the emotions their meeting aroused. The quondam purse snatcher was patiently conveying to his interlocutor some disturbing information upon which, though retarded by the very shock of its reception, the latter would be called to hurried action. The thief had been pointing in one direction, his American companion in another; both gestures and their accompanying glances were, however, directed away from the Opie cottage, and it was while they were made that Sam's descent was accomplished; it was noiseless and close within the shadow of the house wall.

If, however, he advanced directly, the enemy's attention might be directed to Marcia's position, which

was just possibly unknown to them, but which, thus revealed, might be made the object of an attack in case they, two to one, overcame their attacker. The cross-eyed man must be captured, also his probable accomplice in whatever was afoot—but the girl's better chances were paramount. Therefore, Jefford's campaign involved a flank assault.

He executed a rapid circuit silently and plunged at the couple. At least in the important detail of surprise, he was successful—he was upon them before either knew it; and before either knew it, he had a grip upon the wrist of each.

"Now then!" he cried.

They were under the full light of the moon, writhing in the clutch that held them. The one captive was indeed the thief of Manhattan. The other was a swarthy, fiery, rather handsome young fellow with black hair and eyes; he wore a dinner coat, and he had tiny mustaches waxed to a belligerent point; just now he was belligerent all over.

"What are you after?" shrieked this dark fellow.

He struck blindly at Sam, whose reply was to shake him as a great Dane shakes an annoying puppy. At the same moment, the more wily purse

snatcher launched a cleated heel against Jefford's nearer shin; the former soldier retaliated by bashing the cross-eyed man's narrow head against a handy tree. Then he held the two wide apart before him, dangling from his far-extended fists.

The professional crook took his fate philosophically, but watchfully; he seemed aware that, in such circumstances as these, nothing could be gained by talking and much might be lost. As he swayed there, the white radiance of the moon emphasized his sharp, prominent teeth that parted his lips even when he was not speaking; apparently, he had been in such a position as this many a time before, and it was likely that he had been taught by experience to proceed lightly and watch his chance.

His companion, literally, on the other hand, jerked against Sam's hold, which held secure, and vocally raged.

"Who—who the deuce are you and what are you trying to do anyhow?"

Jefford vouchsafed an answer to this fellow—to the American, but tightened his clutch on the other of his captives.

"I'm not 'trying' to do anything—I'm doing it

As for who I am that doesn't matter; it's what I am that counts. I'm here in the interests of one of the claimants to this estate—Mr. B. F. Maynard. But I've caught you"—and he wrung the dark man's wrist—"palling up with a guy that's wanted by the New York police as a plain-and-fancy dip. You ask me who I am—who are you?"

His auditor dragged again at the arm that held him.

"Let me go!"

"Who are you?" Sam set his jaw and held the tighter.

"It's none of your business. This man has——"

"We'll see whose business it is. Who are you? If you don't tell me, I'll——" and Jefford gave a twist that brought the answer:

"I'm Laurence Ripley! Can't you see what a fool you're making of yourself? I'm one of Theodore Ripley's sons." This captive's dark eyes blazed. "And I've just got word that a serious accident has happened to my father. He brought the news." Young Ripley pointed to the squinting crook. "Now do you understand, and will you let me go"—the speaker squared his shoulders—"or am I to think

that you're mixed up in the queer things that are happening on this plantation?"

It might be a bluff—Sam at first thought it certainly was—but it was undeniably a challenge that, in his present precarious position here, had to be met.

"What's wrong with your father?"

The question came unwillingly from Jefford's lips. He remembered what Marcia had told him of Mr. Maynard's dislike for the man that this fellow claimed for parent, and yet the query must be put.

He who called himself Laurence Ripley tugged again, and again vainly, at the grip that mercilessly held him.

"Let me go, I say! This man tells me that my father has been struck by a falling boulder from a cliff. He takes a walk after every meal, generally alone—oh, let me go!—but this time my brother was with him—and this workman on the estate doesn't know whether my father is alive or dead."

One thing at least Sam's daring tactics had appeared to determine; he decided that neither of his captives was armed. Had there been weapons here they would, the attacker felt sure, have been

brought into play long ere Jefford turned to the thief: H'm! Where is Mr. Ripley now?"

"I chanced by, m'sieu'," the interrogated creature replied. He tried to edge away, but Sam drew him close again. "I heard the fall of the rock and the cries—the other son's cry and the injured man's——"

"And you took him—you helped to take him—where?"

It was Laurence Ripley who distractedly answered:

"He says my father was taken to our own quarters. I must hurry for the doctor! Good heavens, man, how long will you——"

It seemed somehow true, this tale. At all events, if it was a lie, it appeared to be none of the dark young man's making; he distressingly believed it. That assumption would be safe to act upon. Sam acted upon it.

"Then get along!" he said.

He released one hold. Immediately young Ripley darted away in the general direction of the residence. His companion gave a quick wriggle, but Jefford's free hand fell on the thief's long shoulder.

"No you don't!" cried Sam in broad American.

"What you mean—what you mean—what you mean?"

The remaining captive's mood had changed. His voice, uttering its broken English, rose to a shriek. Sam clapped a palm across the gaping mouth and temporarily silenced it.

"I mean," said Jefford grimly, "that I never pass up a good thing—never. That chap's gone"—he nodded along the way taken by Ripley—"but your case is a little different, son. You're going to stay right here with me till you explain everything you've been up to from One Hundred and Twenty-first Street to this plantation."

The miserable creature struggled until Sam hated the job of restraining him.

"I no comprehen'," the fellow squeaked. Even his voice was that of a rodent. "I never been N'York. I live here on dees plantation——"

"Cut it out," said Sam. "Don't try to lie. You don't do it well enough. Come across. I've got to know the truth. You're not the really guilty one—I know that. But who sent you?"

In the moonlight Jefford saw the flitting expres-

sion on the ratlike face—something of satisfaction, something evil and sinister. He would shake the truth out of the fellow if he had to shake out that more than complete mouthful of teeth.

And just then the prisoner jumped back to the extreme of his human tether. His right foot shot upward.

Sam saved himself in the nick of time. He loosed his hold and dived at the fellow. The flying foot struck him, but, as he had crouched for the leap, it fell upon his chest. He caught his assailant around the thighs and both men crashed to the ground, Sam uppermost.

Jefford struck; the thief bit and clawed. Jefford managed to seize the other's shoulders and pound his head upon the earth. But the earth was soft and the thief suffered small harm. He twisted one arm into action and dug at Jefford's throat.

The entire struggle lasted scarce a second. Sam's right fist crashed into that rodent face before the strangling fingers could close; but, just as his blow fell, there fell also the sound of a sudden summons from the house of the typhoid patient.

"Sam! Sam! Come here! Come quick!"

It was Marcia's voice. It brought Jefford, regardless of all else save her safety, to his feet. Instantly the fruits of his fight slipped through his hold. Now the thief was electrically also erect—and now, with the speed of lightning, he scuttled away into the shadows and safety.

Well, that was over. It received, then, not one more thought. Sam swung toward the open window out of which leaned the girl's questing face.

"Here!" he cried as he ran in her direction. "What is it?"

"Oh, get the doctor!" It was not the feminine nurse-voice; it was the voice of Marcia in her capacity of a startled woman. "Quick! I think Mr. Opie's dead!"

CHAPTER XV

THE LIGHT IN THE WINDOW

"ARE you sure?" asked Sam.

He had run breathlessly into that fatal cottage, passed scornfully the still-snoring negro, mounted the stairs and reëntered the sick room.

His first glance had been for Marcia, but that was at least partially satisfactory. He next swept the apartment.

With death in war he was familiar; but war is turmoil, and death its order; whereas in peace, or times that mimic peace, man regards death as the ultimate chaos and expects it to confuse the very color of any scene upon which it intrudes. Here, on the other hand, Sam's second hurried gaze found everything much as he had seen it last. The atmosphere of fever hung thick and heavy—so immediately sensible to the nostrils as to seem appreciable, a pale yellow mist, to the eye. Into and out of that open window which had served him for an exit in

his advance against Laurence Ripley and the cross-eyed thief, there swirled the same buzzing flight of leisurely beetles and mosquitoes. The Biblical water-jug was restored to its original position; on the bed-table, the night lamp flickered weakly, but undiminished.

"Are you *sure?*"

The girl nodded to the bed.

Jefford snatched up the lamp and stepped thither. The once restless form that lay there was now very still. The draperies had been professionally composed, and the sheet drawn over Mark Opie's face. Sam drew back that covering, the light shaking in his hand. He bent low.

One look sufficed. Framed in its mass of white hair, the large, aged face was set into stern rigidity; the eyes were closed; the long upper lip lay tight sealed forever upon that secret it had silenced in the uttering.

Reverently, Sam replaced the sheet and turned to his living companion.

"Marcia," he said in a lowered voice, "there's no use sending for a doctor."

She had received the lamp from him before he

spoke—the act was one of those instinctive movements of the trained nurse—and, placing it on the table, now bent to readjust its disturbed flame. The soft light outlined her face in profile. At the bottom of his brain he had always thought of her as a woman, ever in need of some measure of masculine guidance and protection—that was the way, in his Wisconsin home, he had grown up to think of every woman—yet what had struck the surface of his observation and clouded the depths was her self-reliance, her firmness of purpose, her unusual capacity for determination in material concerns. Now, in this picture of her, he detected a change.

She was still the sturdy, well-put-together girl of the rosy, out-of-doors type, but, upon all this, anxiety, suspicion, and finally the shock of Opie's death had stamped the pathetically feminine. Her full red lips drooped, her barely uptilted nose, almost piquant, was raised ever so little higher by the suspense in her elevated brows. He thought that her capable hands trembled as his own had trembled a moment ago.

"Yes, he is dead. But—no doctor?" She looked up at Sam, and there was—why, there was fright in

his eyes! "No doctor?" she repeated. "Why, we *must* have one!"

"What? Marcia, are you——"

"No, no!" Her breast rose and fell as she turned to him. He realized that she had not yet put one query concerning what must have been his puzzling departure. "I'm all right. Don't you see? There's to-morrow to think of!"

"To-morrow?" he asked.

"Yes. We've got to think of to-morrow! All that money to be divided—every claimant a gainer by the death of every other—and I'm the granddaughter of one of the claimants who may—who must—be alive——"

"Well?" What could she be driving at, anyway?

Her hands dropped to her sides. The pink palms spread outward.

"My grandfather is an interested party. He said he would make over to me a part of whatever came to him from the *Sept Amis* division. Anyhow, I am known to be one of his natural heirs. Well," she spoke slowly now, laboriously, as the atrocious thing visibly crept home to him, "the fewer of the original seven survive, the more money there will

be for each one that does survive. I would profit by this man's death," she nodded toward the bed, "and I was alone with him when he died."

Jefford understood her at last. His face flinched but his jaw drooped. It was wholly incredible that anybody should for one instant think her capable of such a crime as she implied.

"You don't mean that anybody would suspect you of——"

Desperately she seized both of his arms. It was a clutch such as is given to a sturdy swimmer by some one in terror of drowning.

"Yet—we—don't know what might be suspected." Her words came rapidly enough now. "The mere prospect of much money—the mere chance of it—for some people makes the other people suspicious—the people that have charge of the distribution of it. Who knows what that strange Monsieur Monnier thinks already? At dinner you yourself hinted that queer things were happening on the plantation."

"But who could suppose that you——"

"They don't know me."

"The man was dying when we got here, anyhow."

"I mightn't have done anything. I might just have omitted to do something that would have saved him—purposely. They could think so anyhow. And Doctor Deschamps, the attending physician—this death was absolutely out of line with his prognosis. No," she broke off, "we must get him here—you must, for it's my duty to stay—we must get him here to certify to the cause of—of this."

Her position was equivocal; he saw that. "But—at once?"

"Before any one could interfere. Now—immediately. And one of us must watch in this place till he comes—so that nobody does interfere."

He concluded that it would be safer for her in the cottage than out there on the open plantation where that little crook, warned by Sam's presence of Marcia's whereabouts, if indeed he had not previously surmised it, might lurk in some near-by shadows, persistently awaiting her. Then came, tardily, the thought of the somnolent negro.

"Wait a minute. I'll send that fellow that's downstairs."

Jefford ran to the hall and shook the black man into startled consciousness.

"There's trouble up above," Sam blurted in excited French. "Mr. Opie——"

The negro jumped to his feet. His eyes bulged like white moons.

"Who—who are you, m'sieu'?"

"Never mind. I belong here—now. Mr. Opie's dead."

The American had not counted upon Martinique superstition. "He's dead?" Not for all the wealth of the *Sept Amis* Plantation would the sentinel have knowingly remained an instant at his post when that post harbored a dead man. "Dead?" Even while his fingers were darting out the sign of the Cross, the negro flew through the jalousies and into the night.

Sam had pursued, shouting reassurance, for a few steps before he realized that reassurance and pursuit were alike vain. The fellow was hopelessly gone, and Jefford had to return to Marcia and report failure.

"Then it's you that must go," said she. "As a nurse, it's my job to stay."

Still he hesitated. "I don't like to leave you here."

"You've got to."

No need to add to her alarm by mention of what he had seen on his descent from the window. Yes, he would have to go; he bowed assent to that. "Unless there's a phone in this house——"

They searched. There was no telephone in the cottage.

"You're not afraid?"

She straightened herself with a wan smile. "I appointed myself to the place. I'll stick it out."

"You'll lock all the doors?"

"Yes."

"And the lower windows?"

"I will. Don't you waste time doing it for me."

"And you'll not open up till you see us—I mean till you see the doctor outside?"

"No—no." She pushed him away. "Go!"

He obeyed. He left her. He ran out into the night.

Swiftly he ran. Unnecessary to depend now upon that sullen glow from Mont Pelée; the moonlight was clear, and he had small trouble in retracing the way that he had taken in darkness from the residence, where, in the French way, the doctor,

Sam surmised, would still be seated over his after-dinner coffee with Monsieur Monnier.

Only his questions—often mutually conflicting—kept pace with the American. Where was Maynard? What was the thief seeking? Was Opie's death entirely natural? Would Marcia be suspected? What was behind that peculiar face of their little host? His questions kept the pace—but the pace was hot.

It proved even faster than the runner guessed. His struggle with the thief and his subsequent interview with Marcia had consumed little time—and he was a good runner and always fit. As he drew near his destination he saw the figure of Laurence Ripley not five hundred yards ahead.

Sam had all but forgotten him. If his story was true, of course the eldest Ripley, presumably still alive, must have first attention, but equally of course the doctor must visit the Opie cottage at his first free moment. Sam redoubled his efforts in order to reach his destination before Deschamps should have left there to attend his new patient and so lengthen the journey.

He saw again a light in a high window which he had noted on leaving the house, and now concluded that it must mark the room where Frederick Buckner fought for strength to claim his share of fortune on the morrow. Jefford heard, from a near-by balcony, the notes of Doctor Deschamps' mouth organ:

Au clair de la lune,
Mon ami Pierrot——

Laurence Ripley faded into the shadows. Sam rounded the residence and ran up its front steps. The heavy door was locked and gave no sign of either knocker or bell.

He had raised his fist to pound on the portal when the realization of what had happened dawned on him. There was a rear entrance communicating more directly with the doctor's quarters, and the better-acquainted Ripley had used that.

In search of it Sam hurriedly retraced his more recent steps; but as he did so he noted that the music of the French nursery rhyme had ceased.

He circled a corner and saw, walking rapidly away, two figures: Deschamps and the dinner-coated American.

And then he saw something else—something that brought him to a violent stop.

CHAPTER XVI

FEEBLE MR. BUCKNER

INSTINCT must have muffled his running feet, for his movement had not disturbed that which was going forward. The progress of the moon had brought it to a point in the heavens well beyond that above the center of the residence roof, and a heavy darkness, therefore, protected the wall on this side. As if it had been waiting the chance of the doctor's departure, something, a sort of deeper shadow—an upright shadow—emerged now from this darkness and began to creep toward the part of the house wall which, higher up, was pierced by the lighted window.

Sam flattened himself against the wall. Full as his heart was with his immediate duty to Marcia, there seemed to emanate from that moving object, momentarily closer at hand, an air of stealth almost asphyxiating to the onlooker. For the minute, movement on his part would have been beyond his will,

so furtively fascinating was what he watched; and he justified a voluntary surrender to inactivity by the argument that the very silence and secrecy of the mysterious scene declared its importance in the puzzle of his friend's mission. Here seemed to be something by watching which—could he but remain both hidden and watchful—he would be of better service than fetching the physician. Here, he somehow felt, lay somewhere, ready to be grasped, a clew to the whereabouts of the missing Mr. Maynard.

Intently Sam scrutinized the rising thing. At first he could not determine its nature, but as it climbed, upon nothingness, higher and higher, its skeleton framework became more and more clearly defined. It was a long ladder. A human being, still indistinguishable, was lifting it, with considerable difficulty and infinite caution, to a resting place directly below old Frederick Buckner's window.

There was a brief wait. The ladder scraped gently against the wall. A little of the light from the room above fell upon its top. Then awkwardly, round by round, some one began to ascend.

A minute passed—and Sam could just make out the dark shape of the climber.

Two minutes—and he came well within the light from that window.

Who was it?

Jefford saw. His suspicions of the earlier evening took form as the face of this ascending creature assumed distinctness. The American's lips framed themselves for a silent whistle of satisfaction, of doubt becoming certainty. There was a wig awry; there was a wrinkled face; there was the incongruously large head, and next the small body of Monsieur Monnier, the lawyer. Monsieur Monnier was peering into the window of the invalid—Mr. Buckner's room.

What with the effort of his climb and the imperfect illumination, Monnier's shape was distorted and his features were even more sinister than theretofore. Indeed, to Sam's overwrought fancy they appeared in that low light entirely menacing. Opie lay suddenly dead in his cottage; Theodore Ripley had a few minutes since been mysteriously wounded, and here, as soon as Buckner's physician had been called away, was the manager of the estate climb-

ing to the bedchamber of the last claimant certainly known to be both alive and well upon the *Sept Amis* Plantation.

Jefford, for an instant, forgot his wariness, and, with it, forgot his training in the craft of a scout. He took a step forward. It was one step only and, caution returning with a rush, he hurriedly checked himself, but not before a twig had snapped beneath his feet.

At that, what happened occurred with automatic precision and instantaneous speed. It was as if Sam had pressed some hidden button releasing the spring that controlled a mechanical toy. The spy above heard and did not hesitate. He flung arms and legs about the sides of the ladder. Ungainly as had been his ascent, fear taught him the quickest means of descending; he shot toward the ground like an experienced fireman sliding, at the fire-alarm's summons down the pole from his sleeping quarters to his ready engine. He struck the earth, fell, bounded up, and ran around the house.

Sam's natural impulse was one of pursuit, but the prudence born too late to prevent that twig-betrayal served at least to conquer this desire. He

had some advantage over Monnier so long as that worthy either could not be sure that human eyes had in fact observed him, or be certain as to who it was that owned those eyes if they had. Besides, what was, as yet, to be said or done if Jefford's host were followed and overtaken? No, the plantation manager had indiscreetly left the answer to the riddle of his presence out here behind him. It must lie at the top of that ladder. So soon as he felt sure that Monnier had gone and was too alarmed to return, Jefford moved to take the place he had occupied.

He advanced on tiptoe and tried his weight upon the ladder's lowest rounds. A couple of seconds later, having mounted nimbly, he was himself looking through the opened window at what the agent had seen.

In a simply furnished room the feeble patient of whom Doctor Deschamps held so grave an opinion sat, wrapped with a faded red dressing-gown, upon a pillowed armchair, rubbing his skinny hands together above some papers that rested precariously on his sharp knees. His hair was scant and gray, his forehead heavily lined, and his nose was like

the beak of a vulture. When he smiled in satisfaction over the documents he was examining, his thin lips parted above a few last teeth, yellow and very prominent; and his black eyes that burned like coals were the only token of vigor.

So this, Sam reflected, was the man that, half a century ago, had been the athlete among the sanguine seven! This was he who had counted so confidently on his stamina after fifty years! And now the doctor doubted if Buckner, subject to daily collapses due probably to some disease of the heart, could survive so brief a journey as would be involved in carrying him to the scene of the estate's settlement. The young watcher wanted to be sorry for him, and yet as he looked he could feel nothing but repugnance and an undefined fear.

From the recesses of his dressing gown the occupant of the room drew a big old-fashioned silver watch. It was plain that he was startled by what it told him; he looked so quickly about him that Jefford only just managed to lower his head before detection.

When Sam thought it safe to resume his observations the subject of them had risen to his feet.

The old man, now amazingly moving with anything but the weakness of age or illness, walked quickly to a corner cupboard. He extracted a key from a pocket of his red wrapper and, opening the cupboard, lifted out with ease two instruments from its recesses.

They were a heavy pick and a businesslike spade.

Sam gaped.

The old man gingerly opened the door of his bedroom. He looked, to right and left, into the hall. With his head cocked like a watchdog's, he listened. Then shouldering those heavy tools he strode away.

CHAPTER XVII

IN THE OLD SLAVE QUARTERS

AFTER all, Marcia was safe as long as she remained behind the locked doors of the Opie cottage. She had promised to lock them and to open to the doctor only—and she was a woman of her word. Meanwhile, of course, no hurry on Jefford's part could speed Deschamps from a living, if injured, Ripley, to a dead Opie, until the physician had done what he could for the wounded man, and here in the residence was emphatically something that demanded instant investigation.

Sam put his hands on the sill of the open window. He vaulted lightly into the now-deserted room.

He had bought leather leggings for his ride from Fort-de-France; from below these he now tore his high shoes. As he tiptoed forward he knotted them together by their laces and slung them around his neck.

A dozen hesitancies objected to his proposed

course, but he brushed them aside. A hundred speculations as to the meaning of the mystery charged his brain, but he repelled them. It was, he had decided, the hour for action, and he well surmised that the action would require all his thoughts and all his resourcefulness if he were to carry it to a successful conclusion.

What conclusion did he expect? He expected nothing; action, stark and immediate, sufficed. Well, he was to have it.

He crossed the room in three strides and as the man he was pursuing had done, scanned eagerly the hall. It was long and dark, but it was not deserted. Down it, some twenty yards, he could hear—he could almost see—the retreat of his quarry. In his stockinged feet, Sam noiselessly followed the trail.

There was a stair ahead. That old fellow audibly descended it. At its top, Jefford crouched until the descent of the first flight was accomplished by the tool bearer. Sam peeped down.

Below ran another hall, fairly well lighted by a series of hanging lamps. There the figure in the red dressing gown stopped for an instant, again

to assure himself of safety. He looked up and round about, and, as he looked up, Sam, with his chin to the floor abovestairs, saw that old face clearly again, twisted by an expression of malign and self-satisfied shrewdness.

Then, still jauntily shouldering the tools, the figure proceeded down the lower passage toward the rear of this wing of the residence. There stood a door obviously leading to still farther depths. He opened it. Darkness lay beyond.

Jefford, through the railing of the staircase, watched him lay aside the tools and draw, from a recess, a lantern. He scratched a match softly on his pajama leg and mumbled a black oath as it failed at first to ignite. Then, when the faint glow finally flickered, he transferred it to the lantern itself and glanced back once more; nothing to be seen! With renewed confidence, he lifted the pick and spade to one thin shoulder, took a step forward and disappeared down what seemed to be a flight of stone steps, closing the door quietly and meticulously behind him.

Sam, with softly padding feet, ran down. He traversed the passage and gently opened the door.

There was indeed another flight of stairs there, and of stone. From the lower level came the secret glow of the lantern.

His reporter's memory had always stored all manner of information, useful and worthless alike, and now he recalled something that told him what must lie below. Most of the old houses of the West Indies have what is counted as their ground floor, a short seven feet above ground. Beneath this is no cellar that is a cellar in the common sense of the word, but a maze of basements divided into rooms, now large, now small, where, in the days before emancipation, the wealthy planter lodged his negro slaves. It must be into the former slave section of the residence of the old *Sept Amis* Plantation that his perilous quest was leading him.

Collecting pools in the rainy season and at all other times hot beyond a white man's powers of endurance, those quarters must have been, even when tenanted and given such care as plantation women could spare to them, little better than so many dungeons. Now, for years entirely neglected, they would be the home of nothing but vicious insects, of loathsome reptiles and, perhaps, of hideous

disease. Jefford shared with the bravest soldiers their dread of other than human dangers; his heart nearly failed him, yet he pressed on.

One step—another—and a third, Sam stole on downward. A fourth and his outstretched stockinged foot touched the hard clay floor and recoiled from its contact.

The place was cluttered with cobwebbed lumber. It was damp with an unwholesome, sticky dampness. A flying cockroach buzzed into the follower's face and startled him more than if it had been a blow.

The lantern ahead provided but the faintest guidance, and Jefford, once he had made sure that its bearer's movements certified to his sense of security, had to pick his way painfully in order to avoid noisy collision with the rickety riffraff and shadowy obstructions that all but barred the way.

Not so the other man. He, evidently, had gone by here on some recent excursion and now moved with certitude toward a definite goal. That seemed to be something at the farther end of this division of the quarters, and it stood so close to a door

in the wall there that the door could not have been opened wide. Here the night prowler deposited his lantern on the beaten earth, laid beside it the tools, and sat himself down upon an upturned box with the sigh of one who sees at least half of his work well accomplished.

Sam sought quick and catlike refuge behind a barrel not ten yards away. He lay there curled tight; but, by extending his head ever so slightly, he commanded a fairly good view of the old man.

That ancient figure, still seated, divested itself of its flowing wrapper and sat erect in pajamas of some light color, which hung about the long form as if it were an unfleshed skeleton. It again consulted its watch and again seemed annoyed at what the timepiece registered. Then replacing the watch it leaned forward and patted softly that toward which all this tortuous progress had been directed. Jefford could see this now. It was one of those gigantic pieces of luggage which, in the seventies, were called Saratoga trunks; but, unlike everything else observable in the former slave quarters, it was not—the lantern's light perfectly showed it—it was not covered with dust.

The old man patted it a second time. He chuckled, and the noise of his chuckle seemed to his unseen auditor as loud as the explosion of a shell in a dugout—and every bit as dangerous.

Then they waited. The one lying concealed against that floor beaten to granite hardness by generations of bare black feet; the other, never guessing he was not alone, seated on his box-end, where the yellow illumination from below, like a lurid exhalation out of the Pit, showed his crafty face sometimes smiling, sometimes worriedly impatient, but always his parchmentlike hands patting—always patting—the curved back of the Saratoga trunk—thus they waited.

For what?

Again that army of rival interrogations assailed Jefford's brain. Again their regiments rushed him with mutually antagonistic questions. But again he beat them off. To surrender was to confess that there was no reason in any of all the baffling events that were enacted here on the Sept Amis—and to admit so much was to go mad.

Once more the ancient's gaze was directed to his watch.

"Ha!" He swore a black oath.

Sam had not lived a life wholly among soft-spoken people. He had fought in France. But this oath, germinated in that brain so close to the grave, made him jump. What was the impious old man waiting for, who must have but such a short time to wait for death?

Death! Lovely Martinique seemed full of it. Jefford frankly shivered. What was *he* waiting for—Sam?

Dully the query began to revolve in his mind.

Waiting for what? Waiting—and for what?

On that repetition of the question came its answer. Suddenly, from behind the trunk, the door in the far wall began—Jefford rubbed his eyes, but it was true—the door began cautiously, a fraction of an inch at a time, to open.

The old man saw it, too. He had, indeed, seen it before Jefford. He was erect on his shrunken but firm legs. He was leaning toward the slowly advancing panels—and one heavily veined hand had drawn from some holster under his pajamas a dark and very deadly looking automatic pistol, now held ready for instant use.

Then around the edge of that so discreetly moving door and into the circle of light, there advanced the top of a head stingily covered with colorless hair. It curved upward. A retreating forehead showed itself—eyes, and one of them, the right, with an ugly cast. The whole ratlike face of the purse snatcher of Forty-fourth Street and Fifth Avenue was revealed here in these old slave quarters of the residence.

Then the pale eyes saw the weapon and the head jerked back.

"You fool"—the ejaculation came from the startled crook in his native patois—"put down that gun!"

In native patois, but Sam could understand it in his hiding place, and the old man he had followed here had no more difficulty than Sam. The lantern jaws of the pajama-clad creature closed. He smiled, and, as he smiled, his beak nose seemed to touch his chin.

"How was I to know that it was you? You are so late that I might have expected anybody!"

Came a sulky answer, "It was necessary to delay."

"But all is well?"

"All."

"I have heard about Opie—he is dead." The head, like a bare skull, in silhouette, wagged with a wide grin. "Now—eh—the other?"

"Dead also."

"It is certain?"

"Or sure to die before morning."

"He saw nothing, Alphonse?"

The Rat laughed now—silently. Sam could see him laugh. "You may trust me for that!"

"Then why are you so late?"

The erstwhile purse snatcher protruded his narrow shoulders into the room. That accomplished, he stopped with an air which plainly declared that he would come no farther. He spoke in an echoing whisper:

"Because I was right about that other thing."

The old man leaned across the curved top of the trunk. "You mean an arrival? The——"

"What else could I mean?"

"Where?"

"Where I guessed."

"And now?"

The rodent face grew sullen. "It was not my

fault. Monnier—well——" Alphonse shrugged. "I was too late."

The elder creature's face was moved still farther into the lamplight and Sam, from his observation post, felt that he had never seen such hate as it now depicted. Its senile features worked like those of some nightmare goblin. The pistol fell to earth, and the yellow hands were raised until they cast clawing shadows on the ceiling.

"Too late?" There followed another oath. "But you must—you must——" Rage strangled articulation in the skinny throat.

"Can I not follow a trail?" said Alphonse, grinning. "I think it will lead me into the Black Swamp—and if the *fer-de-lance* does not end it there, I will!"

The gaunt frame under the pajamas underwent a sudden change. The face relaxed. Here, it seemed to say, had been at last demonstrated something like the proper zeal.

"Yes—yes! I understand. But lose no more time." Wizardlike fingers were again extended, this time as if in some hideous incantation, or some

yet more hideous—some satanic—benediction. Then low and rapidly whispered instructions, and finally: "Go—go!"

"Then you——" began Alphonse.

"I will attend to this"—there was a leering nod at the trunk—"myself."

As he spoke, the old man with a vicious movement lifted the lid. Sam, from his hiding place, could restrain his curiosity no longer. He, too, rose, but so intent were the others on what was revealed that neither saw him.

What they saw—what Sam saw as those talons held suddenly aloft the lantern, was enough to rivet any observer's attention. The tray had been taken from the trunk long ago and into the wide interior had been crowded the dead body of a white-haired man.

"Maynard!"

Had Jefford's lips given sound to that name as it rushed into his consciousness? The room seemed to ring with it and yet neither of the conspirators heeded. Precipitately, but silently, Sam resumed his former position and lay there, trying to stifle

the sound of his rapid breathing—dreading betrayal of his own pounding heart.

"So you have done it?" Alphonse was saying with what seemed a habitual sneer. "But only now have time for the disposal of him? Well, right here beside the door. But, you will have to bury him here—and, yes, you will have to do it alone. You've told me to go, and I'm going."

"Yes, yes!" The other hurried him away. "I wanted your help—I waited for it—but now your news changes all that. This other thing is more important—much more important. So, now, I can do alone what has to be done here—I must, and I am still strong. Go! Ha! I have many years to live! Go away!"

Alphonse gave a wily smile. "My faith, how sure you old ones are that you will live forever."

"Get on!" snapped the skeleton.

"I suppose now," said Alphonse banteringly, "you think you'll outlive even me?"

"I am sure of it. Bah! If you do not start at once, you will not live one minute; I'll bury you and this other thing together."

It was plain that the young crook was afraid,

but plain, too, that he did not want to show it.

"*Alors*, until to-morrow?"

"Go!"

"At the conference in the salon?"

"Go!"

"At nine o'clock?"

"*Will* you go?"

The door closed. The trunk lid fell. The old man in pajamas lifted the pick.

CHAPTER XVIII

PLAIN AS DAY

ONCE before on that night, Sam had alone attacked two men; but there he was in the open, and both of them had proved to be unarmed. Here he found himself cooped in this strange portion of a house all of whose inmates seemed inimical, and one of his enemies had a pistol within ready reach. Jefford had come to spy; on the Rat's entrance, the American was indeed, impelled to make a fight for it; then, however, horror at sight of the trunk's ghastly contents stupefied him. It was only now that Alphonse's going broke the spell and Sam's revolted soul cried that he ought to spring upon the gravedigger, knock him with one blow into insensibility and then dash after the cross-eyed man. Nevertheless, even this command passed unobeyed, and for an excellent reason. Even as Jefford instinctively poised for the leap, he heard something that he had not heard heralding Alphonse's

entrance into the basement. A key turned in the door; the purse snatcher was cautiously securing his companion against interruption from that quarter.

Yet, as Marcia's particular enemy, the crook must be followed, and, since his caution made the issue of a chase more doubtful—giving, as it did, Alphonse the handicap of a protected exit, whereas Sam must now run upstairs in order to leave the house—Jefford questioned the wisdom of first stunning a creature who might then recover and set pursuit upon the pursuer's heels. He concluded that Monsieur Monnier, scared from his strange manner of trysting with this hoary villain, must be on the alert somewhere about the premises; Sam therefore durst not risk giving an alarm. Throughout all this mysterious plantation the doctor was the one man he would have trusted—and the doctor had left the residence.

The pick cut into the earth; the digging began. As the pick descended, Jefford stealthily reached the stairs and began a silent rush up them. He was none too soon; he had only just turned into the corridor at their head when he heard the old man also, but more deliberately, climbing.

A table stood midway down the hall and Sam dived under it. The gravedigger thrust his vulturine head and neck through the doorway, looked about and then withdrew them and closed the door. Evidently it was his worry over the tardiness of his accomplice—or accomplices—that had driven this precaution from his mind in the first instance, and he had only this moment remembered it.

Jefford pulled on his shoes and ran to a window. It was shuttered and bolted, but he shot the bolt. The aromatic odor of highland vegetation, dried during the day by the sun and now steaming in the dews of night, entered his nostrils. An instant later and he was on the ground and circling the house.

From his brief knowledge of the residence he decided that the way by which Alphonse had entered it must be a long one and must open somewhere at the front.

He made the turn undisturbed. He went perhaps fifty paces farther, then stopped short. A dark shape was advancing toward him—and toward that wide flight of steps which led upward to the main door.

Sam crouched. Had he been seen?

He had been. The dark shape started.

"What's that?"

A woman's form, a woman's voice. Startled it was, but used with sufficient self-control to keep it very low. Marcia's. He knew it. Where would he not have recognized it? For the second time within a brief hour, she had innocently—or almost innocently—delayed him.

"It's me—it's Sam." He stood up—drew close.

"Oh!" That was sheer feminine relief.

"You're not hurt?"

"No. And you?"

"I'm all right. But you—you haven't been disturbed over there?"

"No. I——"

Innocent delay, but none the less delay! In sheer nervous reaction from his tense experience, annoyance swept him. This was the woman upon whom, he had fatuously thought, he could count to remain at her post—the woman of her word!

"I told you not to open the cottage until—— Has the doctor been there?"

"No."

"Why, you promised me——"

"And you were to hurry."

"Something happened to change my plans. What happened to *you?* What are you doing here?"

The danger to which all practical women lay themselves open is that they lead men to expect them to be practical forever—and then men are disappointed. "You were gone so long," said Marcia. Her complete change of front was included in that. She who had said Mark Opie's body must not be left alone had left it because she herself—a trained nurse, too—had been too long left alone with it! "I thought you might have been—I don't know *what* I thought. I decided to come for the doctor myself."

Even Sam's ignorance of womankind—even his flash of anger—was no proof against this betrayal that she had really come in quest of him; but the pressure of events, and the thought of what he had left behind him in the slave quarters, warned him that he, at least, must be practical. Besides, he was a man and, having been at last made free to use the whip hand, he would use it.

"The doctor," he rapidly explained, "has gone

to the Ripleys' cottage, wherever that is. Old Ripley has had an accident—and you must not stay here. You *must not!*"

The clear moonlight illuminated the wide lawn. On the side far beyond which the lowering volcano towered, something moved. Sam dragged the girl into the shadow of the nearest palm.

"See there!"

He pointed. Too intent on its task to heed observation, an unmistakable figure was darting to and fro. It was bent double and its actions were those of a sleek hound picking up a scent.

"It's—it's——" She clung to Sam.

"Yes, it's our friend from Fifth Avenue. Marcia, I can't let you run around this place alone—and yet I've got to catch him. I think he's after the doctor—I think he suspects Deschamps knows too much about——" This time he did not hesitate to take her hand. "I can't tell you now, but I've got to get him!"

Alphonse seemed to have picked up the trail. He started at a swift, silent trot in the direction of Mont Pelée.

That glimpse of him roused the girl's indignation, and indignation always steadied her nerves.

"You've no pistol?"

"No—but he hasn't, either."

"Then go after him!"

"But you?"

"I'll be all right."

"You mustn't——"

"I'll be all right, now that I know it's only that sneak thief. You can trust me this time. I don't know what came over me before, but it's gone, whatever it was. I'm——" Her tone softened. "Now I've seen you again, somehow I *know* I'll not be afraid any more." She achieved complete courage—even managed to shake her finger at him. "You can send Doctor Deschamps, and explain to him when you come back. Nobody will have been near Mr. Opie yet—I'm sure—and I'll start straight there. For you—for us—*this*"—she meant, he knew and agreed with her, the pursuit of Alphonse—"is more important."

He saw that she was right. The direction in which the little crook was going was not the one

that had been taken by the doctor and Lawrence Ripley—no hope of his picking them up en route.

He cemented his own authority. "Now, listen. If I'm delayed more than fifteen minutes, call for help from the Opie place. Call till you get one of the plantation hands, or somebody. Then send him for Deschamps. When Deschamps has seen—seen what's there, tell him to get a person he can trust; trust, mind you, and tell him to go down to the residence slave quarters by the stairs in the hall of this wing over here. If there's any one in the first basement he comes to—understand that—the first basement, under the hall—why, he'll see enough to know what to do; but if there isn't anybody there, why, then he's to look for disturbed earth there—and dig!"

Her eyes were large. "Why? What?"

"Never mind. You mustn't ask. Tell him all you know about Opie's queer finish and tell him I'm not crazy. Now, say it all over to me. It's vital—you've got to have it straight."

With an odd submission to his intensity, she hushed her questions and quickly repeated, letter-perfect, his instructions. Again her training held;

she asked nothing even when he added: "But you are not to go with the search party yourself. Whatever happens, you're not to go till—till it's over! Will you promise that?"

He put his hands on her shoulders and looked steadily into her troubled but resolute face.

"I promise."

"That above all!"

"I promise."

Yes, he could trust her now, he was sure.

"Good-by."

"There'll be no danger to you?"

"From that rat?" He laughed—in spite of all the horrors of the night, he laughed.

Her response was to give him a little push toward the spot where Alphonse had last been visible. Sam hesitated only long enough to catch her in his arms; not before she had vanished did he realize that he had dared to kiss her.

With that realization he dashed off. He could see a movement in the thicket toward which Alphonse had headed, and for this Jefford struck out. He entered it and found that the moonbeams penetrated much of the foliage and splashed, here and

there, yellow disks of light along an almost overgrown path that was the single trail to be found there. Along this he gave cautious chase.

Millions of dollars were at stake—millions to be divided at nine o'clock on the morrow, and those millions had worked havoc in somebody's avaricious mind. Somebody was trying, regardless of the cost of life, to secure a large part, if not all, of this money for himself.

Somebody?

More than one—three!

An explanation came to Sam at last—an explanation that all but halted his pursuit, so clearly did it seem to show the entire mystery. It was, he told himself, as plain as day.

Old Buckner meant to claim, Jefford reasoned, the whole fortune for himself, and out of his winnings to reward Monnier, the trustee-manager, without whose connivance it had been found impracticable to proceed. In order the better to divert suspicion from himself, Buckner had simulated heart disease. Deschamps was a good fellow, but no better doctor than one should expect to find in such a spot; Buckner had hoodwinked him as to his

own condition, and the lawyer had fooled him regarding Opie, after administering some fatal drug to that invalid yesterday afternoon. Maynard had been secretly imprisoned in the residence and finally killed there, and the ratlike——

Sam seemed to see it printed on the leaves that shone like burnished metal all about him.

That former employee of the plantation had been hired for the rough work—at what a price it was easy to imagine. Something that Benjamin Maynard had said, or some memorandum or draft of a letter found among his effects, made the conspirators believe that he had communicated his undoubted fears to his granddaughter. Alphonse was dispatched to New York to intercept, if possible—to seize in any event—this communication.

He had failed; the travelers had arrived at the plantation and boldly disclosed at least a part of their conjectures. A clever rigging of the telephone, so that Sam would suppose himself talking to police headquarters in Fort-de-France, when he was really talking to some confederate—perhaps to Alphonse himself—in a workman's cottage or an empty office —this had delayed the Americans' expected blow;

but Sam's words to the Rat when encountering him with Laurence Ripley convinced Alphonse that Jefford knew too much. Sam was to die, too, and it was Sam, and not the physician, that Alphonse thought he was now tracking!

The phrases overheard in the former slave quarters fitted his theory perfectly: "I was right about that other thing"—Alphonse's suspicions of Sam.

"He has been here." Having escaped Jefford, the Rat followed him toward the residence, but did not overtake him.

"I was too late." Alphonse concluded that Sam had come to the residence to spy, had then found out what he wanted and so was gone again, this time scared into the shelter of the swamps. Most likely Jefford had, after all, been seen by the fleeing Monnier, when the latter was interrupted in his clandestine expedition to visit Buckner by the ladder route.

There had been no chance, in the encounter at Opie's, for the Rat to "get" him, for then Sam had surprised the fellow and therefore acquired the upper hand; but in the dark—from the rear—a stab in the back or a shot——

Was Alphonse armed, after all? He must be!

In retrospect, the American could hear the hideous laughter of that old man in the dressing gown—could see the wizardlike claws that waved the Rat on his mission of murder. Just why Monnier should use a ladder to visit his accomplice was yet to be determined. It was yet to be determined just how Alphonse had been deceived into believing that Jefford had fled, of all places, toward the dreaded swamp, the Black Swamp of the *zombis*. Enough now that, following only a figment of his fancy, the trailer was trailed by the very man for whose life he lusted.

With all his former knowledge of the Wisconsin lake country in full use, and all his war-trained faculties alert, Sam hurried on.

CHAPTER XIX

MARCIA MAKES A REQUEST

THE nineteenth amendment to our Constitution has not yet changed the natures of our women more than it has altered the complexion of our politics. Marcia really meant to go back to what she had already came to call "the Opie Cottage." She had proposed that course herself; then Sam had commended it, and, quite contrary to her earlier habit of mind in regard to him, she found herself liking his air of authority. Still, in spite of her hospital training and semimilitary experience, it was hard for her to yield altogether to all of the unexplained dictates of another.

She had started to run lightly up the avenue between the royal palms, and yet the farther she went the less she wanted to go. The questions that she had not asked Sam burned in her head, and one very annoying half answer presented itself to each. Something desperate was imminent and

she—lately a nurse in the pandemonium of the Near East—was to be sent away.

Marcia slackened her pace. She stopped. She leaned against a tree trunk.

She watched Sam's tall, lean figure disappear through the moonlight, and into the thicket. With a pout of distaste she looked in the direction of the cottage she had so lately quitted. After all, Opie was dead; she had dutifully fulfilled the final requirements of that situation. If she were to think at all of her own position—well, it was the doctor she must find. Her own position? It was very equivocal indeed, and it would not be bettered in the fifteen minutes delay proposed by Sam. She ought to have Deschamps there just as soon as possible. If it would be all right to send for him in a quarter of an hour, why would it not be all right to go for him now?

Gathering her skirts up to her knees she ran back to the residence.

She nearly fell up the long flight of front steps. Having looked in vain, as Sam had once done, for bell or knocker, she pounded on the panel with her fists. The answer was at first only a hollow

echo through the great hall beyond. Her hands were bruised ere she was rewarded by the appearance of the black door boy, his eyes frightened, who opened the door a mere crack and presented his almost pale face in the light of a tall candle. He peered out doubtfully.

"Who's there?"

"Me. Mademoiselle Maynard. Don't be scared. I merely want you to tell me something. Where is Monsieur Ripley's cottage?"

The boy breathed relief. He directed her readily enough, but the directions were complicated by his own entangled mind and his crude patois.

"Come with me and show me."

"Impossible, ma'mi'selle. M'sieu' Monnier had to go away hurriedly; it is fifteen minutes since. He bade me not to leave the residence."

Marcia bit her lip. "Did he know Monsieur Ripley had met with an accident?"

"I believe yes. But yes, that we all knew."

"Then he, too, is probably at Monsieur Ripley's."

She went there. She had spoken truly enough to Jefford about her emotional condition—though the night was growing late and the way was long and

lonely, she was not afraid—but she twice missed the route; she lost patience and, consequently, time. As for what she found when she at last reached that cottage which proved to be the one assigned to the uses of Theodore Ripley and his two sons—she found not Monsieur Monnier—she found a tragedy.

The building stood close to the road. It was illuminated throughout its ground floor. The door hung open, and about the whole structure there lowered that appearance of domestic routine caught between the jaws of the unexpected which makes a house disorderly in ratio to the orderliness of its usual life. That appearance told Marcia not to knock, and she entered, accordingly, unannounced.

The square hallway had evidently been used as a common room. It was well furnished, though sparsely, and there were three men standing in it—three men standing and another whose form, covered by a sheet to the chin, was extended, very still, upon a horsehair upholstered couch.

"Mamselle Maynard!"

Deschamps came forward, the sympathetic, but cool and self-possessed physician.

"I wanted you," began Marcia—and then she had

another glimpse of that form on the couch, and her speech trailed off into silence.

Rapidly, with proper respect for the amenities, yet in a voice that was lowered far under its usual cheery pitch, Deschamps performed the introductions. These two gentlemen beside him were the sons of Monsieur Theodore Ripley—Laurence—that was the dark and dapper young man with the waxed mustaches, whose dislike Sam had incurred —and George, older, yet under middle age, with a soft, apologetic face and a great deal of blond and lightly curling hair. The former's cheeks were flushed as if by anger, the face of the latter was stained by grief.

"Have I——" Marcia's eyes went again to the couch. "You know I am a trained nurse, Doctor Deschamps. Can I——"

The recumbent figure was that of a big man whose advanced age had not dealt unkindly with what must have been originally a strong physique. He had a florid face; he had a gray mustache; he possessed the features of one who had been a hard worker with a quick temper. But now the eyes were closed, and the rigidity of his pose rendered

unnecessary the words of the doctor, uttered with a sad shrug and a helpless outturning of empty palms:

"I was myself too late. Alas, M'sieu' Ripley, Sr., is dead."

Marcia felt as if she were suddenly in the blind center of an inexplicable mental cyclone. She knew so little of what was happening about her, yet the terrific force of everything overwhelmed her. She was pale, but her tone was commonplace as, discarding formal sympathy, she asked:

"How did it happen?"

George was kneeling now at his father's side. He raised his tear-stained face to her.

"After every meal, father generally takes a walk alone," he said—in spontaneous deference to Deschamps he spoke in French. "To-night—I don't remember why—I insisted on going with him, perhaps because of the storm. Oh, yes, I do remember; he told me there was something he wanted to say to me. He even sent Laurence over to Mr. Opie's with a message that neither of us understood——"

Grief—it was no unmanly grief—checked him.

"Go on!" It was the doctor urging him in kindly tone to continue his story.

"Oh, something about 'keeping his eyes peeled.' Father never quite took us boys into his confidence, but we saw that he'd been worried about something since he got here—about this miserable tontine, I guess. Then—well, we were walking quietly, though he seemed angry at something, and we were watching the clouds that sort of stand upright along the horizon in these parts, instead of lying flat the way they do at home." He paused again; his brother Laurence was nervously pacing the room, but George evidently was one of those of whom grief makes lovers of detail. Then he went on: "We were just below those high cliffs that edge the Chemin St. André where you turn into the plantation, when something came crashing down. It was a boulder. Father jumped to get—to get out of the way and——"

"And jumped," hazarded the sympathetic doctor, "in the wrong direction?"

George's curly head drooped in assent to the edge of the couch.

Deschamps whispered to Marcia as to some one somewhat connected with his own profession:

"His back was broken—and scarcely another scratch." Aloud he said: "It is most mysterious. How did you escape, M'sieu' George?"

"I don't know." The elder son spoke with quick passion. "I wish I hadn't escaped!"

Laurence broke in:

"And then, when I was running for you, doctor, that damned idiot that I told you about held me up! I don't know who he was. I wish I did. He said he——"

The doctor raised a quieting hand. "I am so sorry, but, *mon cher ami,* your poor father must have been dead—quite dead—when he was brought into this house."

Something in his tone made Marcia remember her own mission.

"But I was looking for you, too, Doctor Deschamps," she said. "I wanted you to tell me about Mr. Opie."

Death was indeed in the air. The three men faced her in horrified anticipation—and her voice failed her.

"M'sieu' Opie?" repeated the doctor, and his tone seemed to betray the fact that, though he would consider the reply incredible, he knew—as they all thus suddenly did—what it would be. "What of M'sieu' Opie, mamselle?"

Marcia suffered one of those relapses from her professional habit which the strange happenings on the plantation were rendering more and more frequent. She pressed her clasped hands to her throat:

"Oh, please go and see! It's not far. Shall I come, too?"

"I'm of no use here," said Doctor Deschamps. "If there is anything wrong—but I don't quite understand, mamselle."

"Shall I come?"

"No, it is not necessary. The distance is nothing by the short cut. You are worried because——"

"Because I think—I know—he is dead, too!"

"Dead?" repeated Deschamps.

"Dead?" echoed George Ripley.

Laurence's voice was sharp:

"Mr. Opie, too!"

Dead—he also. Yes—for all the surprise of two

of them—that was it. That was what they had all, somehow, expected her to say.

"What's wrong with this damned place?" cried Laurence Ripley.

"That's what's wrong," said George simply, "it is damned."

The doctor, naturally the quickest to recover, stroked his curling beard, yet, though he spoke in a professional key, his words were the words of that most helpless of creatures—the scientist whose science fails him.

"But that is impossible, mamselle. When I last saw him——"

Nevertheless, after he received her silent answer to the long look that he gave her, he hastened through the front door and into the night.

"Shall I come?" This time she had called it after his retreating form.

But Doctor Deschamps shook his head. He had looked for a break in her nerves when he first met her; he must know that now she would be small use to him at the Opie cottage.

Once he had gone, Marcia, in the succeeding silence, understood, however, that she must not re-

main here. There was no sound in the hall except the low, muffled sobbing of George Ripley, still kneeling by the couch, and the nervous pacing up and down of his brother. The girl felt that there was something indecent in her intrusion. She was seeking words in which to preface her departure when there came an agitated knocking at the door.

Monsieur Monnier, his wig askew, his puckered face greatly troubled, and his nose a twitching lump, burst in before his knock could be answered.

"Mon Dieu! What is all this?" he demanded.

Quite apart from what he expected to see, it was plain that the little agent was suffering under some great strain. Marcia, with active intuition, filled a small glass for him with brandy from a decanter on the sideboard.

Monsieur Monnier accepted the drink in palsied fingers. He seemed afraid to look toward the couch. He was about to raise the glass to his lips when, as if forced there against his will, his eyes fastened on the figure stretched, cold and still, upon that couch, not six feet from him. Then his deep gaze shot back to the living.

"He's dead?" he cried. "Monsieur Theodore Ripley is dead!"

He started away from the subject of his horror. The glass fell, splintered, on the floor.

Rushing in a returning tide to Marcia came all her earlier antipathy for this man. He had assumed from the first a queer attitude toward the subject of her grandfather's disappearance—tried to keep her and Jefford apart—opposed her going to the Opie cottage, nurse though she was. He had passed a secret hour that afternoon with a patient whom Doctor Deschamps then considered in no danger—and now the patient was dead, and this other claimant mysteriously dead also. Sam had shared her mistrust.

And yet, before she, even in her own mind, could give her suspicions form, Laurence Ripley strode to her. He pushed his dark face almost against hers in his apparent anxiety for the truthful answer to a sudden doubt that had seized him.

"That man who stopped me!" he cried. "It was outside Opie's cottage. He was an American, and he was with you! That's what he gave me to

understand. Now, then: Who is he and what's he doing here?"

What was this? She flushed hotly. Only Doctor Deschamps' hurried return relieved her of the necessity of an immediate answer. The physician rushed in from his visit to the near-by Opie cottage. His comprehensive glance swept the room, but he addressed himself particularly to Marcia:

"I am so sorry!" His bright eyes were full of kindly feeling. "I am so very sorry that you had to be alone with him."

"But—but——" objected Marcia.

He shook his head as at a tired child.

"He was doing so well," the doctor declared, "only early this afternoon, when I saw him last. Now I regret to have to announce that I have found it as you said. M'sieu' Opie is—is no longer of the living. I have been at fault professionally, but I think you can understand. There must have been a sudden relapse. Oh," he looked straight at Marcia, "I should have remembered that it is not unusual in typhoid, and as a nurse you must know it, mamselle—and not so much blame me. M'sieu' Opie was seized with an unexpected hemorrhage.

He died very quickly—and, I am glad to add, without suffering."

Marcia looked limp, but she suddenly recalled Sam's parting words. She would not wait for his return, however brief; she must clear the mystery as far as possible.

"Doctor Deschamps," said she, and she recklessly said it loud enough for every one to hear, "I want you—with any of the others you think ought to accompany you—to do something for me."

"Yes—to be sure, mamselle." The doctor was all sympathetic courtesy for what promised to be a case of nerves.

"I want you to go down to the old slave quarters under the residence," said Marcia. The instructions that Jefford had given her came back almost verbatim. "I want you to go down to the old slave quarters by the stairs in the hall of the right wing. If there is anybody in the first basement you come to—the first basement under the hall—you will see enough to know what to do; but if there isn't anybody there, why, you are to look for lately disturbed earth—and dig."

The silence of stupefaction was upon her hearers.

Slowly she looked around at the faces circling her —one scornful, some incredulous, all mystified— and then there came to her, not any true solution of the enigma in which she and they were all somehow involved, not even a clear, though faulty attempt at solution, such as had lately come to Sam hurrying toward the Black Swamp, but at least a certainty that the one way to the one true solution was along the path he had described to her.

Her head rose; her eyes dilated. She concluded: "And then you will be on the right road for finding an answer to the riddle of both the death of Mr. Opie and the death of the man who lies here on this couch."

CHAPTER XX

THE BODY IN THE CELLAR

A GUST of sharp laughter shattered the ensuing pause—the broken laughter of an overwrought and suspicious man—Laurence Ripley, and his father was stretched in his last sleep so close at hand. It was only the snapping of heartstrings drawn too tight for endurance, but it was shocking.

It shocked Monsieur Monnier into ejaculation:

"Bienheureuse Sainte Rose de Lime!" he shrieked.

"We should dig?" cried the doctor through his silken beard.

Those of Gallic blood had of course first become verbal. George Ripley's smothered cry came later.

"Good God!" he gasped.

"Pah!" snapped his brother. "You wouldn't fall for such rot, would you? Don't believe her!"

But at first nobody further heeded him. Monnier, the factor, tottered toward her, his wig at a dangerous perch, his steel-rimmed pince-nez all but fall-

ing off his bulbous nose, his deep-set eyes smoldering. The elder of old Ripley's sons buried his face in his hands. The physician alone returned to reason; he resumed his professional manner.

"My dear mamselle," said he gently as he put out a soothing hand, "you are in a crisis of the nerves. What wonder? You have had to support two very severe blows during this so unfortunate night. If you will but be enough considerate of yourself to permit me to prescribe——"

Marcia's gratitude for his good intention suffered from the strength of her resolution—made all the stronger by Laurence's attitude—to enforce the absent Jefford's orders. She drew away from the rest of the company, but her withdrawal was no retreat; it was made to take up a firmer position.

"Yes," she said, "you are to go there and dig."

Every one, except Laurence, advanced toward her. Again they surrounded her. Threats, astonishment —hardest of all to bear, that suave assumption, so characteristic of a medical man, that she was hysterical; these burdened the glances directed toward her. She was one woman against those men; but she was by no means helpless. She gave them

gaze for gaze. Involuntarily, her fingers intertwined, but she made her voice quite steady as she resumed:

"You are mistaken, doctor." She began with Deschamps, whose special training made him the most formidable of the group. "I'm no neurotic, and I have not been driven crazy—not even temporarily—by the 'blows' you mention. You yourself have seen queer things happening on this plantation during the past few hours. Well, I tell you there is a clew to them at the place I named."

"But what is it that you know?" Monnier demanded.

She was sure of Sam's judgment. "Go and see."

"And how do you know it?"

"How does that matter?"

"But, dear mamselle," the physician struck in, "you can scarcely expect us——"

"Doctor, the simplest way to test your diagnosis of my condition is to do as I say." She turned to George Ripley, now regarding her out of bloodshot eyes; his, she realized, was a mind easier to influence: "And I want you to go with Monsieur Deschamps."

Oddly enough, it was Monnier, however, who, at this, gave the earliest token of compliance. "That house you wish invaded," said he significantly, "is still my place of residence, for I am still the factor in charge of this estate. If there is an investigation, I shall well be a part of it——"

"Ah, mamselle," began the doctor once more, "if you will only——"

"Or," Monsieur Monnier wound up, and his face assumed a sudden air of decision that quickened her every doubt of him, "since you *have* made these curious observations concerning a place for which I am as yet peculiarly responsible, *eh bien,* if these other gentlemen still remain unwilling, I shall go alone!"

That about-face was scarcely less startling than had been Marcia's commands; after all, Monnier was a person of importance on the *Sept Amis.* When he took a step toward the door, while Marcia wondered if his desperate idea was to lessen by his presence the effect of any discovery likely to be made at the residence, Deschamps, shaking his head in a doctor's disapproval, nevertheless moved as if, under protest, to follow. The more ready George

was already shoulder to shoulder with the factor when Laurence forced his way among them.

His dark cheeks were crimsoned. Under his waxed mustache his lips worked spasmodically. "You're a nice collection of idiots!" he all but shouted. "I never saw anybody swallow such bunk before!" He had started to speak in the American variant of his native tongue, but with a savage effort, switched into French. "Name of a name! Are you all drunk?"

Deschamps frowned at him. "M'sieu', me, I approve of this no more than you do, but what would you have? And, if you please, since it appears impossible for you to recollect that you are in the presence of a lady, at least remember that you are also in the presence of the dead."

Laurence gave one look at the couch. It served only to heighten his excitement.

"That is why I'm trying to say all this. Can't you see what she really wants?"

George gaped at him. Monsieur Monnier's deep eyes narrowed.

"What do you mean, m'sieu'?" he sharply inquired.

"I'll show you!" Laurence faced the girl. "What about you?" he sneered. "*Of course* you'll go along?"

She had not forgotten her promise to Sam, but she dared not plead that to this man who had suspected him. Instead, she indicated the body of Laurence's father and, shaking her head, declared:

"Somebody must stay here."

"Ha!" her tormentor exulted. "I'd expected that. Well, you needn't worry about your duty. You've no duty in this place. *I'll* stay. I want to stay. Now, will you go?"

What was this man driving at? And how could she break another pledge to Jefford? "No," she said.

Laurence, grief crazed and eager for revenge, broke into that strident laugh which sounded so blasphemous in the chamber of the dead.

"Doctor—Monsieur Monnier—George, you boob—you all hear that? You hear what she says? She sends you away, but you bet your sweet life she won't go with you!"

Half in one language he spoke; half in another.

His meaning none missed. Again the physician protested:

"My *dear* m'sieu', she is a young lady——"

"Oh, rot!" Laurence interrupted. "You're a string of fish! She has her game to play—that's what she has. And she tells you to go on a wild-goose chase, and you all go! You don't even make her tell you what it is she's so sure you'll find—you don't even force her to tell you how she came to know you'd find anything." He again confronted the girl; the other men suspended their departure.

"Now then, you've got *me* to deal with. What is it they're to dig up in those slave quarters?"

Marcia's blue eyes met his serenely. "I don't know."

"Then how do you know that there is something buried there? Perhaps you'll tell us that, anyhow?"

It might be that she had already failed in the degree of discretion implicitly promised Sam; she would not fail again. "I won't tell you."

"You daren't!"

"Laurence!" That was George's voice.

"M'sieu' Laurence——" That was the doctor's. "This is no manner to exhibit to a lady."

"Ass!" cried Laurence at George. "There never was a woman that couldn't get around you. Fool!" he yelled to Deschamps. "You think you know everything because you think you know a little about medicine. Well, you've been tricked about one of your patients already—you'd better be looking after the other—after Buckner. Can't you see there's something up—and that she's part of it?"

"Of course I do not think anything so monstrous of Mamselle Maynard," the doctor said, "but I do think that her nervous condition——"

The cold voice of Monsieur Monnier cut in.

"These affairs are nothing to me. A certain statement has been made—a certain sinister hint has been given—in no matter what conditions, about an estate for which I have been responsible for twenty years, and for which I shall continue to be responsible until nine o'clock this morning. I shall immediately investigate it."

"Then you're as big an ass as my brother!" declared Laurence.

"I am an ass who knows his own business," said Monnier, straightening his wig, "and who attends

to it—and not to other people's." He made sure of his glasses. "Come. I am going—who also goes?"

And so, after all, it was this suspect that decided matters. Marcia trembled for the success of Sam's plan—whatever that plan proved to be—precisely because Monnier agreed with it; but she had to pay a mental tribute to his daring.

"Oh, in that case——" said the doctor.

"I'll go," muttered George.

"Well," said Laurence, "*I* won't! This young lady is heiress to a claimant who may turn up at the last minute, and she wants us out of the way for some reason or another—perhaps so she can pay the same kind of visit to old Buckner that she paid to Mr. Opie. Well, I'm going to stay here beside my father, and I'm going to keep an eye on her."

He was alone in that course of conduct. Although the other men upbraided him for his accusations, they left him alone with Marcia.

Into the night, that already was turned toward the momentous morning, they straggled. George Ripley swayed from grief and weariness; the physician walked as one would walk who commits an act of

friendliness that is derogatory to his professional opinion; but the *avocat* factor strode ahead of them in a tight-lipped, inscrutable resolve.

George hung breathlessly upon Deschamps' arm.

"It does seem odd——"

"Hush!" said the doctor.

They reached the darkened front of the residence. Without pause and without word, Monsieur Monnier unlocked its main door. He found and lighted candles.

"This way, gentlemen. Be so good as to follow me."

He led the procession through passage after passage until he came to the hall that bisected the right wing. Down it he walked with a sure tread and did not hesitate until he had come to the stairs that gave on the old slave quarters below. Even there he stopped only for breath.

George whispered a caution without knowing what it was he feared. The doctor leaned forward. Monnier, with a swift, but dramatic, movement, opened the stair door.

They all peered down.

Darkness. Darkness and silence—and nothing else.

"Was Laurence right?" George audibly wondered. "Is it a wild-goose chase, after all?"

"The young lady was, to be sure, somewhat hysterical," suggested the physician dubiously.

"Nevertheless," said Monnier, as one who knows what he is talking about, "we must descend."

He took a lantern from a near-by shelf and lighted it. He went down the stairs, the other two, each with his separate emotions, following at the factor's heels.

The lantern threw its dancing rays over dusty lumber and cobwebbed ceiling. It fluttered into far corners where the foot of man had not fallen since a time when the tontine of the Seven Friends was young. And then, sure enough, it fell—— No, not on any person who had preceded these searchers here, for of living human beings the cellar was empty. The light fell on a portion of the earthen floor that, unmistakably, had suffered recent disturbance.

"Oh, God!" George Ripley choked.

But with the next breath he cried out:

"Get a pick and spade, Monsieur Monnier. Doctor Deschamps, where can we get a pick and spade?"

Fifteen minutes later, where it had lain under scarcely four feet of clay, they discovered the body of an old man.

George dropped his spade. He clutched at Monnier, but Monnier made to push him aside, and the young fellow tottered toward the physician.

"Wh-who is it?" he whispered through chattering teeth. "Wh-who is—can it be?"

"Very easily we may guess," said Deschamps.

"What is that?" snapped Monnier.

The doctor bent forward for a professional examination. The factor stood rigid. Suddenly George Ripley gulped an answer to his own question:

"Of course, I never saw him, but—but it must be Mr. Maynard! *How did—did his granddaughter know?*"

CHAPTER XXI

"COME AND IDENTIFY HIM"

LEFT alone with the grief-crazed, but at last sullenly silent, Laurence Ripley, Marcia walked over to his father's body and, as she had done in the case of the so different Mark Opie, drew up the sheet until it covered that face, still so forceful—still, as it seemed, so resolute to live. The remaining son made no open protest; he stood at the door, with shoulders squared and hands ready, as if he expected her to make a dash for liberty. Instead, she sat in a chair and turned a determined back to him.

She did not want him to see her eyes just then, for they were troubled. They were almost desperate. Had he looked at them, he must have witnessed their wild confession of inability to find any answers to the inquiries hammering over and over at her head.

Where was her grandfather? Where, now, was Sam?

A tropic dawn comes suddenly. To the visitor it appears that night is one moment at its blackest and the world asleep, and that then, at the raising of some invisible wand, it is full morning. But to the dweller in the tropics there are a dozen heralds of the day's approach; often the stars pale, generally the wind rises, always the hum of the insects is stilled. Outside the Ripley cottage, these announcements were now delivered; inside, the strangely assorted couple sat on, dumb and oblivious.

Thus minutes passed—many minutes—thirty—three quarters of an hour—and more——

What had happened to the elder Maynard? Over the *Sept Amis* Plantation the Angel of Death had flown that night. Mark Opie, expected to be convalescing, had died; the vigorous Theodore Ripley was killed. Marcia forced herself to face the possibility that her grandfather had not survived—that, in fact, he had preceded his boyhood friends beyond the curtain. She had felt sure that he had come to the plantation; then Opie confirmed her faith. Yet nobody else seemed to have seen him—or, if he had

been seen, the knowledge was being concealed. Why?

And now had Sam run into the same danger? She reviewed all that had happened since the day she landed in New York from Europe—the ransacking of the hotel rooms; the theft of her purse; the pursuit of her taxicab; how her cabin had been entered; how the thief had escaped. She recalled the interruption of the lunch beside the waterfall—the silhouette of a spying head above the cliffs at sunset. Was it the sunset of yesterday? It seemed a memory of years ago! She saw again that bent form before the residence, darting here and there like a hound picking up a scent.

Sam had spoken as if he expected soon to come back to her. How many hours was that ago? And did he expect a quick return? Did he not fear something which he had not wanted to make entirely plain to her? What were his words?

"If I'm delayed more than——"

What was it that he had wanted Deschamps to dig up?

Marcia shuddered. She must put these interroga-

tory phantoms from her. She rose and turned toward that swarthy Ripley still standing at the door.

He became at once alert.

"I'm not going out," she said calmly.

"I know you're not!" said he with savage significance.

"You mean you would stop me if I tried?"

He nodded.

Marcia drew herself up; he had gone quite too far too often. "I want you to be frank with me," she said. "I want you to tell me why you have as much as made a serious accusation against me. Now I want you to make it openly to me—or else drop it forever."

Her own speech was so frank, her glance was so clear, that she momentarily shook his boyish suspicion. He flushed; but, as his gaze went past her to the couch and the figure on it, his face again darkened.

"There have been a good many deaths around here," he mumbled.

"And you think I have had something to do with them?"

"Your grandfather is the only claimant that's unaccounted for."

"But you think I could have done these things?"

"I think that fellow you had with you could!" Laurence flashed into open defiance, and the sound of his anger seemed to increase his rage. "Who is he, anyhow?"

Well, why shouldn't she supply that information, after all?

"His name is Jefford. He is a newspaper reporter, and he made a splendid record for himself in the war."

"That's his story!"

"Do you doubt it?"

"Never mind whether I do or not. If everything's on the level with you, why do you keep Mr. Maynard in hiding?"

"I haven't any more knowledge of where my grandfather is than you have. I wish I had."

"I'll bet your friend has the knowledge for you. Where is he now?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know much, do you? Do you know where he was when my father was killed?"

"Certainly. He was with me."

"A long way off from George and father, I suppose?"

"From the entrance to the plantation? Yes, a long way off."

Laurence bent forward threateningly. "So you say—and you were alone with Opie when Opie died!"

It *was* too much, this repeated hint of her guilt! Her indignation struggled for adequate words, and found none. "How dare you? How *dare* you?"

She rushed toward the door. He barred her exit. He laid hold of her arm.

There could have been only one issue to that encounter, but the encounter was halted. As she stood there, her breast rising and falling, her angry eyes crossing swords with his, there came from behind the door toward which she had dashed the sound of shuffling feet, the murmur of low voices. Then the door opened, and the doctor came in.

The smile was gone from his bearded lips. His hand on the knob shook like a sick man's, and his face was very grave.

At sight of him Laurence released her. She drew back with a quick intake of the breath.

"Mamselle Maynard——"

"Yes?" Herself, she could hardly hear that monosyllable.

"When you asked us to do that digging, doubtless you had some idea of what we should find."

"I—I didn't know. I was told to tell you. I——"

Deschamps went on:

"That which we have found we are taking to the plantation mortuary. We have a lantern. M'sieu' Monnier asks that you will come and identify the body."

He beckoned. Sure now of what she would see, Marcia, with cheeks from which all the blood had fled, followed him as if walking helpless in some terrible dream. Laurence came heavily behind.

They were out there, scarce a half dozen yards away—the lawyer and George Ripley. As Deschamps picked up the lantern that he had deposited by the path when about to enter the house, the yellow gleam showed that the factor and George each bore the end of a rough litter.

Marcia, stricken to sudden action, ran to that.

The doctor held high the light, so that the face of the dead man was fully revealed.

"Who's this?" The girl's voice rose with startling clamor. "Why do you want me to identify this man? I don't know him—I never saw him before in all my life!"

CHAPTER XXII

PURSUIT

THROUGH that thicket which invaded the *Sept Amis* Plantation almost to its residence, Jefford made as swift a way as caution permitted along the only trail. It led, he knew, in the direction of the great volcano; from what he had overheard in the former slave quarters, he surmised that it must at least skirt the morass so much feared by the negroes of this countryside, the Black Swamp; but for a long time he was stimulated by the lust of the chase surviving in us all, and he was sustained, in odd contrast, by the spacious and melancholy beauty of the tropical night.

His heart bounded with the sense that, at last, this evil mystery which had ensnared and yet eluded him and the woman he loved could almost certainly be met by force—that at least here was the best opportunity yet provided for bare hands to drag it into the open and in the open either kill it or be

killed by it. His eyes were luminous with the knowledge that the creature who had at least three times escaped him would not escape him again. There was no path except the one he followed, and back along that would turn the man he followed as soon as he found that he followed it in vain.

Jefford was not armed. Was the Rat?

He had not appeared to be, during that encounter before the Opie cottage; but, if Laurence Ripley was not his colleague, Alphonse would then have been loath to betray his own desperate desires by any display of steel. None had been made against the pistol in the cellar, but on that occasion there had been no need for such production. Everything considered, it seemed extremely unlikely that a creature of his sort would undertake to track an enemy unless provided with mechanical means of encompassing the enemy's death.

Well, Sam didn't care. With his clasp knife, itself ineffective for offense, he converted a broken branch of cedar into the club of a cave dweller, and grudged the time consumed. Here, anyhow, was weapon enough for him.

The path curved and dipped. Now and then,

through the green leaves overhead he could see a green sky arched to infinity; stars shone among the tree limbs as if they grew there, and moonlight poured all about him a vivid silver rain.

Then the first thicket ended in what might have been a northern pasture; the trail crossed this and climbed the farther side. Sam crossed, too; he ascended and, entering by a brief avenue of magnolias, came upon the veritable jungle.

He had the flash lamp from among his hasty Fort-de-France purchases. Its use might mean betrayal, but not to use it meant that he must either lose the path or sit still and await the Rat's return. The former course he dared not take, the latter his battle hunger forbade him.

The white ray of the torch showed him that he was in a sort of endless cavern whose roof and sides were living vegetation. It was, in fact, what the people of Martinique call an *entonnoir du forêt,* a passage, winding and tortuous, but comparatively clear, through the rank growths of native forest. The walls were of tangled vines, the ceiling was of trees embracing, and the soil into which his feet sank to the ankles was the decayed leaves of cen-

turies. Every growing thing that he could see looked poisonous; the leaves bore purple warts, the boughs dripped fetid moss, nightmare forms of fungi leered at him, and curious odors from the steaming sod crept with an unpleasant intoxication to his head.

Nor was there any lack of animal life. As he circled vast anthills swarming with their inhabitants and dipped below the fronds of giant ferns, he was deafened by the clatter of living things. There was a din of insects that did not seem to pause in their clamor while they stung, and what more dangerous species of life slipped past him on the trail, or peeped at him—perhaps waited for him—at any yard ahead he would not let himself conjecture.

Once he shut off his lamp with an abrupt snap, having felt rather than seen a presence on his right. No sooner was the darkness complete than he perceived a pair of sulphurous eyes fixed on him, scarcely five feet away. He stood quite still. The gaze met his through a long pause. Then it shifted; there came the faintest pad of feet as something backed away into the depths—and the malignant eyes were darkened. When Sam renewed his light,

there was nothing to be seen where the beast had been except some gently swaying vines.

He knew that Marcia, somewhere far behind him, must be anxious. He presumed that her position, unless she had got into touch with the doctor, could not be one of entire safety. His progress necessarily slow, he seemed already to have been hours in this tunnel, and yet he would not turn back. He did not forget discretion; he did not progress without care for the sounds of his advance, but something—it may well have been some toxic emanation from the mold—deadened him to any purpose except that with which he had come here.

It was while in this condition that he became slowly conscious of a change around him. The insects had fallen into a silence more ominous than their former hubbub. They were quiet, but somewhere ahead rose a noise that woke him from his trance and set his nerves vibrating like telegraphic wires.

It was the crash of fighting bodies. It was the thud of blows. It was the high-pitched cry in Island French:

"Pig! What are you up to?"

The way made a quick turn. Sam took it headlong.

Before him lay, in the light of his electric torch, the innermost recesses of the jungle—a green-roofed crypt, creeper walled, and, covering all its floor to unplumbed depths, a pond black and thick—stagnant—nidorous—diseased. It was the Black Swamp, and here, on its precipitous edge, two men—the forward-tossed circle of his torch revealed and encompassed them—twisted and battled and called out in a struggle of life and death.

Him they did not see. So poignant was their opposition, so near was the one to destruction, so close the other to the accomplishment of murder, that neither knew of Jefford's presence, or realized the light that bathed them. Their legs were intertwined, and one of them clung with both hands to one wrist of the other. That other struck with his unrestrained fist at his victim's face—bit at the clinging fingers with sharp, protruding teeth already ensanguined—and his hand that was rapidly forcing its way to freedom raised a long, thin knife.

Sam had been mistaken. The Rat had not sought

to follow *him.* Here was he whom Alphonse was after—and was come upon, and was about to kill.

Who was it?

The face of Alphonse was more than ever the face of a rodent. The colorless hair lay flat along the head; even the fight had failed to flush the sunken cheeks; the thin lips parted in a sneer, and the bad eye rolled horribly.

The other face was one that Jefford found entirely strange. It was that of an old man with regular features. Once it may have been—must have been —a peaceful face; but now it met the fear of death with the wild exultation of a Berserker. His blue eyes were aflame as at the relished encounter of an absolutely new experience—the indulgence, perhaps, of a desire that had been for a lifetime suppressed. Those ancient lips were actually laughing as the old, but still strong, fingers held fast to the wrist above which flashed the knife.

All this Sam saw in that moment of time when he came upon the scene, and the amazing drama conveyed to his swamp-dulled brain the conviction of its reality. With realization came again reason, and

with reason returned the ability for action logical and sudden. In one immense contraction of his lungs, he drove the jungle poisons from his body; what, on the reacting intake, rushed to fill the bellows thus emptied was battle-wisdom and battle-fervor.

Instinct had raised his club; common sense lowered it again. For now almost at his feet, the Rat and the Rat's intended sacrifice shifted their relative positions with such suddenness and so inextricably that a sweep of the cedar bludgeon might spell extinction for the wrong combatant.

"Break away there!" yelled Sam at Alphonse. "I've got you!"

But he hadn't. Without lessening the tugging of his wrist, almost without intermitting the blows that his other fist was bestowing, the Rat turned his straight eye upward. A glow of ugly satisfaction suffused it.

"Thou also?" he snarled. "So much the better. I shall kill the two of you together, and have it over with at once!"

What had failed to ruffle Alphonse diverted the old man's attention. Amazingly strong and active as

he was for his evident years, it was plain that he had never been a fighter. For a flash his gaze shifted from his adversary to this newcomer who was attempting the rôle of rescuer; and in that flash his adversary wrenched the knife free.

The old fellow grabbed again at the arm now about to strike.

"Thee would, would thee?" he gurgled in an unusual English. He recaptured something of his former hold. "Well, friend"—in such odd term he addressed his mortal enemy—"I don't let thee loose till I have rolled thee into this pond with me—and then, wherever *I* go, thee will go to hell, where thee belongs!"

But the retaken hold was weaker than its predecessor. Alphonse freed his knife a second time. He raised it.

Sam, dropping his lamp and flinging his club away, leaped, in the immediate darkness, upon the pair of belligerents. He landed with a crash.

"Let him have it!"

That was the triumphant squeak of the Rat. Jefford felt a blow on the shoulder, followed by a slash of agony.

The knife of Alphonse had found him. Sam felt himself kicked, a useless body, toward the stinking water of the pool. He was rolling to the Black Swamp.

Consciousness fled.

CHAPTER XXIII

TENSION

THE sudden daylight, whose warnings none had heeded, was come, long since, to the Plantation of the Seven Friends. An untroubled sky swept from the peak of the volcano to the ridge of *le Grand Fond.*

What if the estate, after a coöperative half century, was to-day to pass to its final owner? What if two of its yesterday owners had lately started upon that journey whereon the traveler is divested of his every earthly possession? Property exists of itself; too often it owns its owners; always it is, in the profoundest sense, independent of them—for property is of the earth and remains here. Already, young as was the morning, heavy lorries were rolling up and down the white roads; black men and women sweated in the fields; from the tall chimneys of the factories smoke poured in rivalry to the smoke out of Mont Pelée. The dead lay unconcerned in the

mortuary; only in the dining room of the residence, were to be found people who met the changes with sorrow or awaited events with trepidation.

They had gathered here after their sleepless night for the matutinal coffee and rolls that three of them scarcely tasted and that the other two did bare justice to. Monnier and the doctor lived under this roof; George Ripley, in his grief, leaned upon Deschamps' stronger character; Marcia's room was in the residence, and Laurence, to whose suspicions daylight had brought no balm, was still unwilling to leave the suspected girl out of his sight, a minute longer than was unpreventable.

The sad-eyed maid with the gold beads had gone out of the room. For a time the doctor endeavored to maintain a conversation with Monnier, but the latter, in spite of a visible endeavor to talk, had fallen back to rolling bread pills that he studied through his bright glasses; every now and then his nervous fingers went to his wig.

There was a long pause. At last George's high voice—he was here because there was nowhere else for him to go and nothing else for him to do—rose irrelevantly:

"When we came here, our house servant told us a Martinique maxim. 'When no one speaks the *zombis* are talking.'"

Where was Sam? And where Marcia's grandfather? The girl's fingers met through the roll they closed on. She glanced at her wrist watch; eight-fifteen.

Had the deep-set eyes of the lawyer observed her movement? He said, "Monsieur Laurin should arrive soon."

"The representative of the Banque Martinique," explained Deschamps obligingly to Marcia.

She cared nothing for that—nothing for this money! For hours only one thing had restrained her from the demand that a search party be sent in the direction in which she had seen Sam go; the dread lest, in this web of mystery, she might, by so demanding, be sending one of their concealed enemies upon the errand.

"Monsieur Reclus will accompany him," pursued the even tones of Monnier. "Monsieur Reclus will be present in the interests of the Fort-de-France Hôtel de Dieu and has been empowered to guard, as well, those of the North American charity con-

cerned. You will recall that these institutions inherit, in case—in case——" He brought his great head around toward Deschamps. "How is Monsieur Buckner this morning?"

Laurence also turned to the physician. It was, on the American's part, a sharp movement.

But Deschamps, stroking his beard, dismissed the evident doubt.

"Better than I have yet seen him. I ran up just before coming to this room. His gain of strength surprises me. Of course I have not risked the shock of telling him"—the doctor interrupted himself to sip his coffee—"telling him about the recent unhappy events; but I believe that the final opportunity of surviving to the settlement of the heritage has proved the very tonic to make that survival possible. The influence of the mind upon the——"

"And so he'll get it all!" flashed the younger Ripley.

"Larry!" his brother protested.

"I don't care!" Laurence slapped the table. "That tontine put a premium on murder!"

His utterance of the word that had so long lain unspoken at the back of every brain there rang out

like a pistol shot. George bowed his head; the doctor raised scientific brows and murmured something about "mental strain;" Marcia's chair moved from the table as if of its own volition; the lawyer's hands fluttered to his wig. Nevertheless, it was he who said:

"Any crime would be for the courts to deal with. None can upset the terms of the agreement."

"It ought to have provided that, in case of foul play, the heirs of anybody that was—was hurt," protested Laurence, "should inherit that one's share."

"My young friend," began the doctor, "the examination which I must make, as the duly appointed medical officer of this district, will determine whether or not there is a foundation for your fears. In the meantime——"

"My duty," said Monnier dryly, "concerns itself not with what the agreement should have been—only with what it is."

Deschamps placed a bit of peach jam upon the remainder of his roll and passed the combination over his beard to his lips. He rose.

"M'sieu' Ripley," he said with his racial trilling of the name's initial, as he patted Laurence's shoul-

der, "of course you wish to attend this meeting and of course you should; but when it is over, you must let me prescribe." He bowed to Marcia. "And for you also, mamselle."

She did not care to attend the conference, but she had had one half hour alone in her room that morning and she would not brave solitude again. She nodded wearily. After the formal settlement was made at the gathering, according to Martinique law, perhaps Sam would be safe—and perhaps it was too late even to hope for her grandfather. Meanwhile she would not even admit that she considered Jefford's prolonged absence as ill-omened.

"And now," said Deschamps, "I trust that you will all recognize in me no partisan, yet a physician who must do his best for his surviving patient." He turned from Marcia and the Ripleys to the lawyer. "We are to meet in the salon?"

Monnier nodded across his bread pills.

"Then I shall but compare my watch with the clock there and proceed to Monsieur Buckner's room."

He went out. They heard him in the salon. Then his steps passed beyond, and presently there came

faintly to Marcia's ears the sound of a mouth organ that, having failed to reproduce the opening bars of the Chopin "Funeral March," was taking up its plaintive central theme.

At the first notes, Monnier got up. He muttered something about the papers necessary for the approaching interview and himself left the dining room. Its atmosphere, with Deschamps gone, drove George Ripley after Monnier. When Marcia stood up, Laurence followed her example.

"You went as far as the entrance to the wing that I'm living in, when I went there a little while ago," she said. She spoke smoothly, but her glance transfixed him. "Do you propose to keep up your attentions now?"

Laurence tugged embarrassedly at his waxed mustache.

"I can't figure it out," he said stubbornly, "but there's something phony going on here. I don't know why you'd want your grandfather out of the way, but if he was out of it, and you wanted the money, why, of course, you mightn't perhaps let on he was dead. Only, don't you understand that, to inherit, he'd have to show up here alive? Now,

we've got nothing but your word for it that that body in the cellar——"

Wheels rattled on the avenue of palms. A carriage drew up. Monnier's raised voice, in the hall, welcomed Messieurs Laurin and Reclus, then sank again. At the same moment the doctor's healthy, elastic tread reverberated again from the salon, and beside it came the shuffle of an old man.

Marcia's indignation at Laurence was again overflowing, but now there happened that which stopped it as quickly as the arrival of the visitors from Fort-de-France and the approach of Deschamps and the surviving claimant had stopped young Ripley's atrocious speculations. She had been thinking that the time would never pass; now she was amazed to find that it was passing rapidly.

The old Breton clock in the salon struck nine.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE BLACK SWAMP

IT was the left shoulder. Sam, before he opened his eyes, moved stealthily the dependent arm—the shoulder blade—the collar bone. It was a flesh wound only. He was stiff—no worse—and somebody had even applied a rough tourniquet and bandage.

Then, at first guardedly, he looked about him.

That twilight which is the jungle's day served for illumination. The atmosphere pressed on his brows and chest like so much lead; his view of the foul pond was through a cloud of giant mosquitoes and blood-hungry flies. A dense development of perpetually motionless magnolias and mimosas of monstrous height domed the scene and, cemented by a mass of vines, walled it round. The horrible water spread out, as thick as jelly, still, impenetrable and seemingly bottomless; but he saw—what had escaped his torch—a narrow, rotting log that

stretched from where he lay, perilously close to the inky edge, and disappeared under hanging mosses on the farther side. Some twelve feet distant sat the stranger of the recent conflict, bound securely to a decaying tree stump, but otherwise showing no ill effects of his battle, and there, between his enemies, the ratlike Alphonse squatted, ready to leap into instant action, his face grinning evilly, the bare knife in his right hand.

"Good day," he cackled.

"How's this?" asked Sam.

"How is what, m'sieu'?"

"I'm not even tied, and he"—Jefford indicated the other victim—"looks as if you were afraid of him."

"Not afraid," Alphonse corrected. "Patient. As for you, try to raise your arm."

Sam had already tried that. Since his captor thought him worse off than he was, he decided to say nothing about it. He merely hazarded:

"I gathered that your side wasn't taking any prisoners."

Alphonse shrugged.

"And you even bandaged me?"

"But yes. You might else have died too soon, be-

cause of the blood effusion. It was necessary that you should not die before recovering consciousness. I am under orders from my principal that, should I take you, I must obtain certain information before I finally dispose of you."

The old man coughed warningly. Alphonse threw a lump of mud at him; it missed his face, but spattered over his already bedraggled long tail coat. Gasping in the steaming air, Sam gripped his self-control.

"H'm," he said. "What information? I won't give it if I don't want to, but I am curious about the sort your principal can want from me."

Alphonse began to strop his knife upon the side of a shoe.

"*Alors,* now we're getting to the point," said he blithely. "I have kept this old cabbage alive so as to *make* you answer my questions."

"He is Mr. Maynard?"

"As if you did not know that!"

"I am," said the old gentleman.

"Shut up!" cried the Rat viciously. Then he resumed to Sam: "First a little news for myself. Is

your girl aware of my connection with the plantation?"

Jefford was determined to abide any insult rather than strike before the best possible opportunity offered, but he did not wish to have Marcia thus brought into the conversation.

"I won't tell you that."

Alphonse was wearing a leather belt. In it he thrust the knife. He leisurely proceeded to Mr. Maynard and, releasing one of the bound man's arms, began to twist it at the elbow.

"Don't tell him!" shouted the Quaker.

Sam's shoulder throbbed. He watched the tortured arm; he saw the resolute mouth—but he saw also the sweat of pain that dampened the heavily wrinkled brow.

"I've got to tell him! Yes, she knows."

Alphonse suspended the rôle of tormentor. "That is well. At last you have again come to your senses!"

"Well," said Jefford, adding a fresh figure to the tally of his enmity, "next?"

"Next," said the Rat, "does anybody else know of M'sieu' Maynard's presence on the island?"

Now it was Maynard himself who answered. He spoke out of the fullness of bitterness.

"I had my doubts of Monnier from the start!"

Alphonse knelt before the speaker but kept his good eye on Sam. "So?"

"I did. That was why, under another name, I arranged, before sailing, to have a boat meet the ship off St. Pierre. It was a common enough thing when I first visited the island."

"The custom is not yet dead," said Alphonse, and he had the impudence to wink at Jefford. "So you have long suspected the poor M'sieu' Monnier?"

"I thought that a man in a position so full of temptation might bear watching. So I cabled to my niece. I had supplies with me; I knew the residence! I hid in its cyclone tower."

"Where, slow-witted, I entered just too late last night——"

"I heard you coming, so I ran—here."

"To await this morning's conference? You hid yourself too well at the plantation, my friend. If no one knows that you visited the island, none need know that you—leave."

"But I did go to see Opie."

The Rat laughed. "*He* will not mention it."

"Mr. Opie," said Sam, "is dead."

The old man bowed his head.

Alphonse tried the knife upon a finger. "But you, m'sieu'," he said to Sam, "you have told no one?"

Plainly, the enemy was in some doubt—and some fear. Jefford considered his position.

"Well?" urged the inquisitor.

With his admittedly able hand, Sam tossed a pebble into the poisonous pond. The mosquitoes buzzed and bit. The pestilential odors thickened.

"H'm. You'd like to know, wouldn't you? Suppose you answer me a couple of questions first."

"You will be very soon dead," smiled Alphonse.

"Anyhow, my curiosity's still a good deal alive."

The Rat shrugged again. "Well, your questions then—because you will be *very* soon dead."

"Why were you sent to New York?"

"That goes without saying, why! To find out—if necessary, by any letters in his rooms or on that girl—where this old one was, since he did not early enough for our purposes appear here. We had need of him, *ma foi*—as of M'sieu' Opie and M'sieu' Ripley."

"To get him out of the way? I see." Sam raised himself on his right elbow. "And after Mr. Ripley had been—had met with his accident, you helped to carry him in and ran to tell his younger son? That son isn't in this?"

The Rat's sufficient denial took the convincing form of spitting into the water. For himself, he had had enough of the witness chair. His knife ready, he stepped to Mr. Maynard.

"We waste time!" he flashed at Sam. "You saw this old fool leave the cyclone tower and, not having seen me, you followed him. Did you find time to tell his granddaughter that now you knew of his presence on the island? See"—he extended the knife in a manner entirely matter of fact—"if you refuse to tell I shall slit his throat."

The old Quaker did not so much as shrink from the steel. "Young man," he cried to Jefford, "hold thy tongue! Rogue," he pursued to Alphonse, "has thee not sworn that thee was going to kill me anyhow?"

Sam realized that now it was touch and go. He rose, as if with difficulty.

"Why," he asked of his enemy, "should I tell you anything to gain us a couple of minutes?"

It was a question that had to be answered. Alphonse lowered his blade and sidled toward Jefford. The colonial's crossed eye was never more sinister, but even it was not so sinister as the smile that he tried to make ingratiating.

"If you came over to our side——" he suggested. "For thirty thousand francs—fifty thousand—anything within reason, you understand——"

So here was another reason why Sam had been left unbound—lest too many intruders court detection, he was to be bribed! His right fist landed squarely on Alphonse's nose.

The Rat reeled backward one step—two steps—three. The hand that did not hold the knife went to his face. When it came down it left only a blot of blood—but when it came down he jumped forward.

Sam bent to meet him; his left arm was nearly useless, and Alphonse, although he must be half blinded, so directed his onrush that his body struck the injured shoulder. Jefford tottered, but he got the fingers of his right hand, by a quick twist, tight upon the other's weapon-bearing right. Then the

Rat brought his free fist down upon the once more gushing wound.

Sam fell. His hold, however, was secure; he dragged his enemy with him.

They were close to the edge of the pool—close to the log that spanned it. The fall had not released Jefford's grip, and, though Alphonse clawed at the hurt, they rose together. So they swayed erect, the Rat now delivering blow after agonizing blow, while Sam forced the other's right arm slowly higher and higher—and then farther and farther back.

"Thee does well!" cried the still bound Maynard, and no ringside zealot could have been more enthusiastic. "Keep on! Keep it up!"

Sam could not have long obeyed that admonition but, as the event proved, he did not have to continue his strenuous tactics five seconds more. He gave a final jerk. The knife flew backward. End over end it spun halfway across the pool, and then—the one chance in a million—embedded its blade deep in that slim tree trunk which spanned the noisome water.

Alphonse pivoted on his heels. He saw what had happened. He made a leap that brought him in safety to the center of the bridge. He lowered him-

self until he was astride of it. He tugged loose the knife.

Jefford had to use his left arm now. He used both arms—with a convulsion of anguish he used them. Just as the Rat liberated his weapon, Sam, by a tremendous heave, raised the near end of the log and dropped it and its human burden into the pool of the Black Swamp.

For a flash—no more—the face of the assassin was visible, distorted with fear. The next, and something else rose to the surface of the waters—something deadly and gray and swift; so swift that it was all but invisible.

Rose—and disappeared. There had been the flash of terrific jaws; now, except for a few slow circles widening over the black surface the monster left nothing behind.

Sam seesawed dizzily at the pond's edge, then slowly crumpled to his knees. A few bubbles fought a way up to the foul scum. They were red.

Desperately sick, the victor staggered to his feet. He cried to Maynard, as if in accusation:

"There aren't any alligators on these islands! I

remember the books say there aren't any alligators on these islands!"

The old Quaker was fumbling at his bonds.

"There are none, friend." He spoke with gravity but with a matter-of-fact acceptance of things as he found them. "There are neither alligators nor caymans; but, by some way, even the most turgid seeming of these ponds connects with the ocean—and the Lord permits, I know, strange and savage creatures on the floor of the Caribbean Sea. 'The deep has put forth its voice, the deep has lifted up its hands.' Will thee be so kind as to tell me the time of day?"

Sam dumbly reached for his watch. It was gone.

"That is too bad," said Mr. Maynard. "I find that my watch stopped at eight thirty. For the first time in forty years, I failed to wind it at dawn. We are some distance from the plantation, and I gather that thee knows I have—or *had*—an important engagement at the residence for nine o'clock."

CHAPTER XXV

AT NINE A. M.

MONSIEUR MONNIER straightened his curly wig.

"So that," said he, "the legal hour having arrived, the terms of this document"—he bowed to the old paper before him as if it were royalty—"having been read; there being but one survivor present, and the proofs of his identity having been accepted by the Banque Martinique in the person of M'sieu' Laurin, we find ourselves arrived at the act of the property's transfer to M'sieu' Frederick L. Buckner."

They were met in the salon. To one end of it a table had been drawn, at the center of which, facing the company, was the lawyer, Monsieur Laurin on his right, on his left Monsieur Reclus. The last two might have been twins; each had a round face; neither had an expression. All three men of affairs produced that effect of self-important automata

which every person of French blood invariably assumes when concerned with "papers."

Beyond were grouped the rest of the company; Marcia, her lips tight, hands clasped in lap, faced the Breton clock, anxious only for the termination of this ceremony; Laurence Ripley, standing opposite, pulled his mustache points and glared at her; George crouched upon a chair edge, his elbows on his knees, his head in his hands.

Monsieur Monnier tapped a second paper.

"It is thus that there passes to a single owner the sole remaining sugar plantation not under state control on the island of Martinique."

He touched a third paper.

"M'sieu' Buckner will now be so good as to sign this."

Doctor Deschamps solicitously bent beside an armchair between the pair of front windows. The bearded doctor's gaze was as clear as ever, but its merriment was immersed in anxiety for his surviving patient.

From the armchair, that one ceased rubbing his skinny hands together and reached upward for his doctor's support. His head was scantily covered by

gray hair, his forehead deeply lined, his nose vulturine. When his thin lips smiled—and they smiled now in senile satisfaction—his last few teeth showed yellow and prominent; but, smile as he would, his eyes burned like angry coals in a dying grate.

On Deschamps' arm he leaned heavily as he shambled toward the table, an ancient, stooping figure in a red dressing gown. He seemed very frail; but his scant gray hair had been meticulously brushed, his outthrust vulturine head showed a smile wreathing his protuberant teeth, and his black eyes burned brightly. He wrote a steady signature.

In sheer abstraction Marcia looked from the clock to her wrist watch. Had her watch stopped? Its second hand moved regularly.

"It is not nine o'clock yet," she said. "It is only eight fifty."

Every face turned toward her. Even Messieurs Laurin and Reclus became human; even George Ripley raised his head. Deschamps said:

"We must not unnecessarily alarm my patient."

The patient straightened; he uttered a kind of bark. His stare at Marcia was not friendly.

"Now we'll see your game," sneered Laurence.

She did not heed him, but she felt suddenly an unreasoning conviction that it was supremely important she should prove her case.

"This clock," said Monsieur Monnier dryly, as he removed his pince-nez and began to polish its lenses with a cambric handkerchief, "has not gained a minute in the twenty years I have been here."

"My watch," the girl insisted, "never loses. I compared it with your clock last evening, and they agreed. Who has been alone in this room? Look at your own watches. Of course none of you was expected to do that; it wouldn't have occurred to you —everybody takes a clock at its face value unless he has some strong reason not to."

They did consult their watches—all but the claimant. He looked at the girl venomously.

"Eight fifty-four," said the doctor. "This is odd! But what difference can a few minutes——"

"Mamselle is correct," interrupted Monsieur Laurin. "M'sieu' Reclus and I set our watches from the cathedral clock when we left Fort-de-France."

The claimant spoke in a high voice and fluent French. "This is the clock of the plantation, and it

is the plantation that is concerned." His face was black with anger. "Its time is official."

That phrase gave Marcia an idea. She ran from the salon, Laurence vigilantly at her heels. She was gone some minutes, yet during her absence none spoke. When she returned, those whom she had left were posed like characters in a tableau exactly as she last saw them.

"I thought there must be some standard of time in Martinique," she said. "My watch is right. I've just verified it by telephoning to the Observatoire Maritime."

"On behalf of the Banque Martinique," said Monsieur Laurin, "I must insist on that decision."

Monsieur Monnier looked confused; he looked annoyed; but here was evidence he dare not gainsay. He blew his bulbous nose. "Certainly," said he, with the best grace possible. "Since this clock has behaved in a manner so unprecedented for it—certainly"—and as he concluded Jefford and the Quaker crossed the hall and entered the salon.

They were mud from toe to top. Their faces were red from hurry, their eyes bloodshot; they breathed like runners, and brought with them the

reek of the jungle. Nevertheless, though Sam moved his left arm gingerly and Mr. Maynard limped a little, they were practically sound, the younger grinning broadly, the elder brisk and businesslike.

"Grandpa! Sam!" Marcia ran to them.

Laurence Ripley looked at his brother. "'Grandpa!'" he mimicked.

"So that's it, you see."

Everybody was standing. The doctor's patient clutched his physician, his face still dark, his mouth working; Deschamps tried to lead him to a chair; he refused to go.

"Sam, you're hurt!" cried Marcia.

"H'm. Hardly a little bit." He started to roll a cigarette.

"Grandpa——"

"Are we in time, my dear?"

Monsieur Laurin turned to Monnier, whose deep eyes opened and shut rapidly, whose wig-occupied hands were desperate.

"Is this——"

"Another claimant?" Reclus supplied.

"I am Benjamin F. Maynard," said Marcia's

grandfather, "and I would be glad to have thee tell me if that clock is quite correct."

To Sam it seemed at the moment that his companion was as money mad as the angry vulture whom Deschamps was trying to soothe here opposite him—the gravediggers of the slave quarters.

"The clock is wrong," said Reclus.

Laurin again sought his watch, and said, "It's still one minute less than nine o'clock."

Monnier coughed dryly, his face a mask. "If M'sieu' Maynard is prepared to prove his identity——"

Out of the breast pocket of his long-tailed coat the Quaker hauled a portentous collection of papers.

"There thee is." His efforts to render into French the speech forms of the Society of Friends were laborious.

Monnier's countenance continued to be unreadable. He received the papers as if acknowledging an introduction.

"M'sieu', I am, as you must know, the factor and *avocat*. Should this evidence be in order——"

"Thee will find it indubitable."

"Then you and M'sieu' Buckner there will share

the *Sept Amis* on the basis that, I believe, you Americans of the North call 'fifty-fifty.'" He bowed to the old man, now supported in the doctor's arms.

"Buckner!" Mr. Maynard walked straight up to the other claimant and scrutinized him as he might a skewered spider in some entomological museum. Then he turned his back on the object. "This is no more Fred Buckner than I am."

"Liar!" screamed the creature thus denounced.

"Calm yourself!" Deschamps cautioned.

His patient broke away and confronted Maynard.

"They have my papers. Prove what you say! Prove it if you can."

"Thee will do that for me." Mr. Maynard stood his ground serenely. "What was the name of the barkeeper at the hotel in Americus where we wicked young men used to play poker?"

The accused snapped scornful fingers. "As if I should burden my memory with such a trifle for half a century!"

At the table, Monsieur Laurin seemed to have momentarily relieved Monnier of command. The banker unearthed from among the papers before him a yellow letter.

"I have here," said he in the voice of a prosecuting attorney, "a letter written by you, Monsieur Buckner, to the Banque Martinique, fifty years ago, about our institution's rôle in this tontine. There occurs the phrase 'the arrangement entered into by us seven at this place.' The term 'this place' refers to the hotel on the letter paper of which the communication is written. It is not likely that you could forget the name of the hostelry in which so important an agreement was drawn up."

"We all knew it as well as our own," said Benjamin Maynard.

"Tell it," commanded Laurin to the old man in the dressing gown.

The old man went white.

Deschamps raised the hand of a warning physician. "You will kill him if you thus persist! I refuse responsibility."

"Tell it," repeated Laurin implacably.

The accused—he was now little more than that—pushed his medical adviser aside and advanced toward his judge. There was now no make-believe in the tottering of his legs. His mouth worked for a second, but no sound came. Across his face of a

bird of prey a horrible emotion swept. Then, slowly, he sank to the floor.

It was more than Deschamps could bear. He sobbed as he removed the inanimate form to the armchair.

Maynard, with a glance at the stupefied Ripleys, stroked his granddaughter's hand.

"I should have prepared thee for all this, Marcia. I meant to; but, after thee arrived, things happened too fast, and I counted upon poor, poor Opie." He faced Monnier. "And now," he said in a crisp voice, "I, who unrighteously always desired to fight, have had my fill of fighting. There will be no more trouble for thee, friend Monnier, if thee acknowledges at once thy share in this conspiracy."

The estate manager's deep eyes blinked, but his other features did not move a muscle.

"My share in the conspiracy?" he repeated. "But that is ridiculous—that." He addressed himself to Laurin and Reclus. "As I told you I proposed, in order to prove fraud—for fear that we could not prove murder—I thought it as well to proceed regularly and to procure this alleged Buckner's—this swindler's signature." He had possessed him-

self of the paper that the pretender had signed. Now the heads of the two men from Fort-de-France bent over it. "Really a very creditable forgery." Monnier beamed at the rest of the company—even at Benjamin Franklin Maynard.

He clapped his hands. From the hall two blacks appeared. Obviously obeying previous instructions, they placed themselves beside the suddenly immobile physician and the equally still figure in the arm-chair.

George Ripley gave a cry. His brother demanded, "Why can't we have real policemen here?"

It was Marcia who answered. "You know very well we soon will have. I thought we might need them. You heard me telephone for the police after I'd talked to the Observatoire. Did you think I'd really cut off and was just pretending?"

Monnier made a gesture that halted controversy.

"I should perhaps," he explained, "sketch to you all—save my two colleagues here, to whom I told it on their coming—this so sordid affair. Our unfortunately unconscious friend in the dressing gown is Emile Gustave Deschamps, until the other day, for many years a resident of Basse Terre,

Guadeloupe, but native to our own St. Pierre and long ago—before my personal memory—a clerk in my father's law office and therefore entirely familiar with the beginnings of this tontine—except, unfortunately for him, such seemingly trivial details as the name of that hotel in the America of the North where it was first proposed. He has also lived many of his unprofitable years in your United States and speaks perfectly, I am informed, the English of those regions. His elder son"—Monnier nodded toward the doctor; the doctor, a true philosopher, bowed gravely in response—"he educated in medicine and, without himself then as yet reappearing on our island in person, lately secured for him the position of physician on the *Plantation des Sept Amis*. There is," pursued Monsieur Monnier, "another son, Alphonse——"

"Was," corrected Sam with quick enlightenment.

"Indeed? Then it is good riddance, that. Well, the plot is enough clear. M'sieu' Opie opportunely dies. M'sieu' Ripley also. M'sieu' Buckner, made ill at landing and conveyed here unseen, expires upon arrival. Then the swindler is introduced into this one's room, coming by night. The swindler,

who was called 'The Tiger' by his devoted sons—the swindler, I say, has the real Buckner's paper from the real Buckner's body, and when the chance offers he buries the body in our basement. With all the true claimants dead, who can unmask Emile? The entire estate will go to him. M'sieu' Maynard, to be sure, worried him; but he trusted him to an emissary—and had the filial physician as an added last-minute precaution set forward the clock. If M'sieu' Maynard alone of all the survivors eluded the net, that was an error of the lamented Alphonse.

"*Helas*—me, Monnier, I was forewarned. Yesterday the unfortunate M'sieu' Opie confided to me that, though our physician diagnosed his case as typhoid fever, he—Opie—had boiled all the drinking water used at his cottage and had, moreover, been inoculated against that disease before leaving his home in Louisville. At my dinner table I merely mentioned my visit to the doctor. His expression increased my suspicions. Later, I ventured, by means of a ladder, to look at this so secluded Monsieur Buckner, and saw that he had a hand-rubbing habit which I recalled my father's saying annoyed him in his former clerk.

"Well, I have a hobby; it is the wireless. There is a station of my own making here upon the residence roof. Thither I repaired, and a conversation with the police at Guadeloupe, whose *dossier* of Emile Deschamps was complete, concluded everything.

"For some," he ended, "I was, alas, too late. I am but human. For the rest—you know."

He ceased, and the room was at once in turmoil. The two gentlemen from Fort-de-France shone like twin suns. Mr. Maynard was apologizing to Monsieur Monnier. George Ripley watched aghast the conveyance of Doctor Deschamps and his inert part out of the room, for confinement, pending the arrival of the police, in the former slave quarters.

"Miss Maynard," asked Laurence, "can you forgive a fool?"

She accepted his diffidently offered hand, then plucked at her grandfather's sleeve.

"You said I was to have your share in this—what do you call it? Tontine—and now your share's the whole thing. Well, I won't accept the whole thing, grandpa. Why, for one thing, having so much money would just tempt me to be boss again,

and you'll be glad to know I've given that up; it's been getting me into trouble every time lately. No, I don't care what the agreement was; I think the heirs of the original seven ought to inherit share and share alike!"

"Thee is a trifle tardy," said the Quaker, drawing her and Sam toward one of the front windows. "I arranged for exactly all that—in the event of my being the sole survivor—ten years ago. My own share I would not touch. As I wrote thee at Corfu, it belongs to youth—to thee."

She kissed him, and the trio looked across the intervening country—across the high green roof of the Black Swamp—to the softly smoking cone of purple Pelée. From somewhere underfoot rose the plaintive strains of a mouth organ executing the old French nursery rhyme of "Clair de Lune:"

Ma chandelle est morte;
Je n'ai plus de feu;
Ouvre moi ta porte,
Pour l'amour de Dieu!

"And now," concluded the Quaker, speaking to his granddaughter, but indicating Jefford, "this young

man is not Titus Jones, whom I told thee to bring, and I have been too busy to ask him who he is. Will thee tell me, Marcia?"

She blushed. She hesitated—and was lost.

"H'm," said Sam, throwing away his unlit cigarette, for he wanted both hands free. "She says I'm her fiancé."

THE END.